Primavera

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by ira_agni

Summary

Leaving his life in Baltimore behind, Hannibal decides to take a wounded Will to Florence with him.

Neither of them are aware of just how intertwined their fates really are, the cold feelings of hurt and distance between them slowly making way for the painful rebirth and delicate becoming of their very own spring.

Notes

As this is a canon divergent setting, referenced canon events may be altered, out of order, or omitted.

Additional tags will be added along with chapters being posted.

I hope you will enjoy reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

ira x

Chapter 1

It was nightfall when Will quietly leaned against the window and looked up at the sky, finally focusing on something other than his own thoughts. The last rays of sunshine, the crescent moon that stood against it, pale and bright. Then his gaze fell onto the square below the apartment building.

He saw the tourists that mingled with the locals, eager to find a nice spot to enjoy dinner and drinks. They filled the stage of his new reality against the backdrop of the warm darkness of the Italian night, illuminated by the lights that shone onto Santa Maria Novella. Will's hand found its way to his lower abdomen as pain and discomfort overcame him once more. And once more, as his memories returned, he envied the lives, joys, and leisure of the ordinary strangers below.

Every time he closed his eyes the overpowering iron smell of blood filled his nose, drowning him in the sounds and sights of heavy rain drumming against glass windows as the life of Abigail Hobbs slipped away beneath his fingers.

For a moment afterwards, there had been comfort. A warm embrace, arms around him, fingers running through his hair, soothing him.

Then there was more pain. Blinding, sharp, all-consuming pain that almost instantly turned to shock. He sagged against Hannibal whose claws were buried deeply in his skin, tearing at his abdomen as the world around Will faded to black.

The apartment door opened with a soft click and Will turned his head, hand falling down to his side, slipping back into the pocket of his trousers.

"Good evening, Will."

Hannibal smiled at him calmly.

"I apologise for coming home so late. My work took longer than expected today. I will prepare dinner right away."

"I'm not particularly hungry," Will replied quietly. He felt numb and cold, and Hannibal's charms did little to thaw the ice that enveloped his thoughts.

"Still, you should eat," Hannibal replied with the same gentle firmness he had had as a practicing doctor. "You cannot keep running on fumes, Will."

For a long moment silence prevailed the space between them, as it did so often ever since they had come to Florence. Then Will gave a faint nod and retreated to his bedroom, quietly closing the door behind himself.

At the dinner table Hannibal meticulously placed the grilled fish onto Will's plate, completing the artistic composition on it, before he poured both of them a glass of his favourite white wine.

Even after all this time, Will couldn’t seem to successfully memorise the name of it. He didn't allow his mind to linger on anything related to Hannibal for too long. He couldn’t.

Nothing about their stay felt right. Nothing about them being together was the way it had been supposed to be. It was all wrong, like a bad dream he couldn't shake himself awake from no matter how hard he tried.

Will began eating in silence, the delicious meal flavourless in his mouth, and eventually Hannibal's words finally rang through to him.

“How is the pain today?”

Will weighed his words on his tongue, then loosened them up with a sip of wine.

“It’s bearable.”

"Is there anything you need? Anything I can do to help?"

Will paused, his fingers slightly clenching around the cutlery. The knife in his hand felt heavier now, almost too burdensome to hold onto.

"No," he replied quietly, "No, I don’t think so."

Will kept going through the motions of eating, wondering if he had answered too brusquely. He considered it, then abandoned the thought again, unsure of what else to say.

At that point, there was nothing he was capable of asking of Hannibal.

“I think I’ll head to bed. I didn’t sleep well last night…”

Hannibal nodded calmly, his gaze fleetingly lowered to Will’s abdomen.

“I can offer a mild sedative. Though I would understand if you didn’t want it.”

“I really don’t…”

Will almost fooled himself into a genuine smile. Then the memories of Hannibal sticking needles into his arm at his office returned to him. He intended to spend as much time in Hannibal’s presence as aware and alert as possible.

Will set down his cutlery and rubbed the back of his neck, feeling uncomfortable and hot, seeking the cool sensation of his hands against the heated skin.

“Will? Are you sure you’re feeling alright?”

“Yes, I-...” Will exhaled softly, trying to focus. “I think I might have a cold coming on. I should get some rest. Thank you for dinner…”

Will rose, steadier on his feet than he would have believed himself to be, and retreated to his bedroom. He tried not to let his mind linger on the concerned look Hannibal had regarded him with as he left.

When Will woke with a start it was deep into the night, his room engulfed in darkness, only dimly illuminated by the street lights reaching his curtains.

He was panting softly, chest moving rapidly, his hair stuck to his forehead with sweat. His lips and mouth felt dry, and his cheeks were hot.

Will tried to gather himself, grasp at the nightmare he was sure had awoken him, yet there was nothing for him to reach out to. There was nothing but the dull, hot sensation in his body, accompanied by the painful pulling sensation he felt in the scars at his belly.

Will tried to sit up, his limbs heavy and body unwilling to obey his commands, and gulped down some of the water he kept on the night table.

When he became more awake, he also became more aware of the sensation between his legs, hot and wet and so entirely unexpected he flung back the covers to reassure himself it was not blood, that he hadn’t somehow ripped open his scars again.

He paused. Still panting softly he passed a hand over his belly, over the prominent, but healed scars Hannibal’s claws had left on him, down between his thighs.

“Fuck-...”

He definitely wasn’t dreaming, and he definitely wasn’t running a cold.

Will fumbled for the switch of the lamp on his nightstand, hissing slightly at the bright, warm light that suddenly flooded his bedroom. He pulled open the top drawer, checking the well-worn, flimsy thin cardboard box of his suppressants.

He counted the dosage left in the box once, twice, even a third time until he was sure that yes, he was quite awake enough by now to think a bit more clearly, at least enough to count, and no, he had definitely not missed any of his suppressant treatments.

Will flattened the crumpled leaflet, smoothing it enough to hastily skim all the densely printed paragraphs.

He hadn’t missed a treatment in months, not even during their first weeks in Florence when he had remained bedridden while healing from his wounds.

He couldn’t go into heat. He just *couldn’t*.

Will found himself feeling so utterly shocked and lost in that moment he almost considered waking Hannibal to ask for his professional opinion.

He abandoned that thought soon enough, just like the cardboard box he dropped back into the drawer, shutting it a little more forcefully than he needed to.

He would calm down, freshen up a bit, and he would sleep, and he would feel better in the morning.

Carefully Will got up and out of bed, aiming for the master bathroom across the living room.

The carpet in the living room felt soft and warm under his bare feet. Hannibal's scent was still lingering in the air, more potent than usual. Will's gaze wandered over the sketchbook by the armchairs, and he figured Hannibal must have taken some time after dinner to unwind with his art.

Will licked his lips and swallowed dryly, and a soft shudder of delight went through him as he reached the bathroom in the dark, the tiles cold and smooth under his feet.

He poured some water into the sink and bathed himself inelegantly, eager to return to bed and to sleep. Only when he was clean again it occurred to him that he had not brought a fresh pair of underwear, so he wrapped a towel around his waist, high enough to cover his scars, and threw his sweat-soaked t-shirt and boxers into the hamper.

With his skin cooled off and mind refreshed, Will took a moment to scold himself in silence. Of course, he was not going into heat. It was physically impossible. There was no reason to be concerned about the sweat of a hot summer night and a little slick between his legs. His body had gone through trauma, an injury placed right near his reproductive organs, and he still had not gotten quite used to the Italian climate yet.

Will braced himself against the sink, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Even in the darkness he could see the blush high on his cheeks, the feverish glow in his eyes.

All he had to do was take a deep breath and remind himself that he would be okay.

There was nothing to worry about.

Chapter 2

Will woke up late the next morning. Not that he had a schedule to tend to like Hannibal did, yet it still felt weird to sleep in so much.

He sat up and looked around his bedroom, and more than ever he missed the presence of his dogs. The room felt all the more foreign and less of a home for their absence.

The events of the night felt far away as he got up and out of bed, finally slipping into a fresh pair of boxers before he went into the living room.

Hannibal had laid the table for him with freshly squeezed orange juice and a thermos full of coffee, as well as pancakes that Will surely had been intended to eat while still warm, right after Hannibal had left. Hannibal's side of the table was empty and clean, and Will wondered if they would eventually have breakfast together again. After almost 8 months, he wasn't holding out too much hope anymore.

Will sat and ate, browsing the pages of the newspaper Hannibal had left as he did.

He only picked up a few of the Italian words, yet there seemed to be nothing he needed to concern himself with. The longer the search for Hannibal had gone on, the more the Chesapeake Ripper had faded from public perception. First the photos, then the headlines grew smaller and further apart, eventually buried far beyond the cover page until they had vanished all together. As far as the Italian public was concerned, there were more important topics than a Lithuanian-born, American serial killer. Just one among the many infamous names from across the Atlantic, far away and unfamiliar.

Will skimmed some of the articles, yet eventually gave up on his basic Italian language skills and focused solely on his breakfast instead.

Food seemed to taste better when he was by himself.

Across from him, Hannibal would still serve as a permanent reminder of things that were uncomfortable to think about, to talk about even more so. Will felt like he had been steeling himself for a conversation for months, a conversation that had never ended up happening between them, leaving him breathless and uncomfortable with words that were stuck in his throat.

As his therapist, even while unofficially, Will had rarely placed as much trust in another person as he did in Hannibal. Or, as he had gotten to know him, Dr Lecter. He had valued his advice, and he had so greatly appreciated a place to feel welcome. To feel heard, and to feel like he wasn't just a psychological mystery to gawk at. Only that perception of Dr Lecter did not exist anymore, and it hadn't for a long time.

A part of Will, desperate to be heard, to be understood and helped, longed for the advice and objective perspective of a person who had never fully existed, only the shell, the mask of whatever Hannibal had deemed would serve him in getting as close to Will as possible.

There was professional curiosity, then personal interest.

Then, destruction.

Will poured himself a cup of coffee and sat back in his chair, his free hand absent-mindedly reaching for his scars, protecting them.

After so many months abroad, Will had had more than enough time to think. To reflect. He didn't think he would ever be able to pin-point the exact moment when everything had gone sideways, yet there were answers he needed. Answers from Hannibal he wasn't sure he wanted to hear, wasn't sure he would be able to trust.

Given the fact that Hannibal had taken him with him after wounding him, despite causing a serious delay in his getaway, he wondered if Hannibal felt the same way.

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After his late start to the day, Will set out to wander the streets of Florence. He would have preferred dense woods and a stream or lake to go fishing in order to clear his mind, yet the dry summer heat and streets full of history would have to do.

After so much time in the city Will felt sure of his steps, able to navigate with ease even at points far from the city centre, away from the tourists. Yet with all his appreciation for the quiet and marvel of the streets void of noise and people, he could not help but feel drawn to one of the most popular spots in the very heart of Florence.

In the shadows of the Loggia dei Lanzi, located between the Ponte Vecchio and the Palazzo del Bargello, elevated slightly, stood a sculpture of Perseus. His face was downcast upon the beheaded, lifeless body of the ancient monster he had slain, his arm raised in victory as he held onto the head of Medusa.

Will often came to see the sculpture, feeling drawn to it in the way only art can speak to the soul, especially the depiction of such an ancient story.

He would stand there, and he would get lost in the details of Perseus and Medusa, letting the stream of tourists pass him by like the water around his ankles in his memory palace.

He often wondered if it was the depiction of violence he was drawn to; if it was the style, the age, the oxidised bronze material.

He wondered if it was Medusa he felt a connection to, not Perseus, and then he agonised over the endless loop of his thoughts, anger and guilt and sadness swirling into one.

The betrayer and the betrayed.

The victor and the victim.

The demigod and the monster.

Heroic tales and misconceptions.

Will would think of the origin of Medusa, the hero Perseus, and then he would think of Achilles and Patroclus, and he would avert his gaze from the sculpture and turn his back on it, disappearing into the anonymous sea of people at the Palazzo.

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When Will returned in the evening he could immediately tell Hannibal was already home.

The air in the apartment was filled with the smell of fresh vegetables, eggplant and zucchini and tomatoes, and he was sure Hannibal had adapted to Mediterranean cuisine once more.

"It smells delicious…"

Hannibal smiled when Will joined him in the kitchen.

"It will be ready in a few minutes. Will you lay the table?"

Will nodded and went back to the living room, laying the dinner table for both of them.

Returning to the reality of his life with Hannibal weighed on him. A strange, twisting sensation in his gut, like the persistent ache of guilt and insecurity. Hannibal's presence was everywhere around him, inescapable, just like his feelings about it he had been trying to ignore.

When Hannibal sat down with him to eat, Will remembered the night he had returned to Hannibal’s office after his release from the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. How sure of himself he had felt, how confident in his seeking of a different kind of connection with Hannibal. To find harsh truths where there had been comfortable lies. Perhaps, this was the mindset he needed to recover now.

"Why did you take me with you, Hannibal?"

Will's voice was soft, yet firm, unwavering as their eyes met across the table.

"Why did you not leave me behind? Let me bleed out on your kitchen floor…"

Like Abigail.

Hannibal paused for a moment, carefully selecting his words as always.

"Because the world is more interesting with you in it. Fate and instinct would see to it that your place within my world remains. For better or for worse."

For worse.

Will's brows creased slightly as he held his breath for a moment, the tension between them suddenly constricting him like a vacuum.

"Do you believe that I will try to kill you…?"

Hannibal appeared unmoved by his question, yet his eyes were curious and seeking as he laid them on Will.

"I believe you will do whatever your nature and conscience deem acceptable. Either for self-preservation or altruistic measures."

Will raised his brows, disdain tinting his words.

"Should it be so *simple* in the end? An act of defence, or an act for the sake of the greater good?"

Letting these scenarios play out in his head felt like an insult, a betrayal to their story.

It was not what they deserved.

It was not their *design.*

"Would you prefer I had left you behind, Will? Absolved you of the necessity of making a choice, here and now."

Will thought about it, the chance of an altered reality playing in his mind like a cassette tape, sounds and images flashing across the walls of his mind.

He saw himself waking up in a hospital bed, well cared for, but alone. He felt the void Hannibal had left behind the air around him like dust, ever present and impossible to get rid of. He would retrace his steps, try to connect to the loose threads that no longer held any weight, no longer led out of the maze of the Minotaur. He would be left with nothing but the scars and the pain of Hannibal's absence no matter where he went.

"No. I don't… I don’t believe… I could live without you. But I don't think I am ready to live with you, either…"

Hannibal paused, and something in his scent spiked.

Will bit his tongue, his words lingering between them as he remained surprised and petrified by his own honesty.

"I have told you many times, Will. You are not my prisoner. I never took you with me for some sort of leverage."

"Then why did you take me…?"

Will's voice was small now, fragile, and he hated himself for it. It was draining, being vulnerable with Hannibal. Dangerous.

Hannibal looked at him and his face turned to stone, emotions wiped clean off the surface, unbreakable like a thick layer of ice.

"You know why. Yet you refuse to accept it."

Will could not bear looking into Hannibal's eyes anymore and he averted his gaze.

It was too much, too intense, too overwhelming.

Will felt fever rise under his skin, discomfort spreading through his veins, the lingering pain underneath his scars.

Will closed his eyes, a painful sigh escaping his lips as he heard his own voice echo in his mind, words he had never said aloud.

Is Hannibal in love with me?

Will shook his head slightly, not ready for this conversation. Not with himself, and least of all with Hannibal.

"I don't *know*."

Will looked down at his plate, the intricate table cloth, the polished wine glasses.

"I shouldn't have asked..."

They finished their dinner in silence.

When Hannibal had cleared the table and retreated to the kitchen to clean, Will kept hovering in the living room, lost in the transitional space between Hannibal’s territories and his own.

He still felt feverish, unwell, not just his body, but his mind as well.

He gathered his wits and nerves for a long time before his feet finally set into motion, carrying him into the kitchen.

Carefully he extended a hand to Hannibal, resting it between his shoulder blades.

"*Don't* turn around…" Will instructed hastily as he felt him move under his touch, yet Hannibal immediately stilled, leaving Will to do as he needed.

Will’s hand remained on Hannibal’s back, feeling the warmth and lean strength of his body underneath his fingers and palm, and he became painfully aware that this was the first time he had voluntarily touched Hannibal out of leisure, not necessity.

Will felt stuck between trying to maintain a level of distance, and the urge to finally shatter the glass wall he felt between them.

Will took a deep breath to steel himself, and closing his eyes he gently leaned his forehead against Hannibal's shoulder.

Being so close, warmth and pheromones were overwhelmingly present, dulling Will's anxiety and distress, and for a moment he allowed himself to follow his instincts, staying close to Hannibal, finding shelter in his shadow.

"I didn't want you to leave without me… Yet, I feared you would…"

Will's voice was so quiet he wasn't sure if Hannibal had heard him at all. Still, he continued.

"I *can't* see myself without you anymore… Everything has started to blur, and I-"

Will exhaled shakily, slightly clinging to the fabric of Hannibal's shirt.

"I feel like I don't know who I am anymore. Who I am when I'm with you…"

"It scares you," Hannibal replied, and Will could feel the warmth and understanding gently vibrating off of his voice. "It frightens you not knowing the full extent of what you are becoming. The extent of my influence on you."

Will's lips parted, yet his reply would not dare cross them, making everything too raw, too real.

Hannibal turned around to face him now, and Will let out an involuntary sigh of relief as the alpha gently placed his hand on his nape, pacifying the ache in his body, calming the raging storm in his mind.

"It is important that you recognise this phase of transition in your life, Will. Don't fight against it, like you have your whole life. Allow yourself to trust in your own instincts, and the power of your true self."

Will felt Hannibal’s scent spike again, his own body receptive to his touch.

"You will be the one to tread this new path, Will. I will merely follow you along to support you in your progress. I will aid you however you need me to. But the choices you make, no matter how gratifying or terrifying, will be entirely your own."

Will nodded softly, slowly opening his eyes to finally look at Hannibal again.

"I need time…"

Hannibal's lips gently curved into a smile.

"Whatever you need, I will make sure you shall want for nothing…"

Chapter 3

When Will awoke that night he was covered in sweat, sheets sticking to his skin, gasping for air as the images of his nightmare danced before him in the darkness.

He saw himself standing over Abigail's dead body in Hannibal's kitchen, felt Hannibal's arms close around him from behind.

This time, it was not only the claws that penetrated Will but also his fangs, sharp and powerful, ripping open his skin, tearing at his neck as he marked him, claimed him, tore out his throat.

Will felt trapped between panic and his instincts, the longing for a connection, for a mating bite; for his alpha to claim him, to mate him, to christen their union with his blood.

There was fear in his mind, panic in his heart, arousal in his groin, and Will felt like was going to burst wide open with all of these feelings inside of him.

He untangled himself from his sheets and leapt out of bed as quickly as his brain would let him, dizzy and disoriented in the darkness, still clouded with sleep as Will staggered into the bathroom.

He turned on the faucet and gulped down mouthfuls of water, trying to quench his thirst, to extinguish the heat in his gut.

When Will felt like he couldn't breathe anymore he turned off the faucet, dragging himself over to the copper bathtub.

The material felt so cold and so comforting against his burning skin that Will laid down inside it, letting some of the cold water run, letting it pool around his body.

"Will?"

Hannibal entered the bathroom, drawn to it by the noise, the distress of the omega in his company.

He knelt beside the tub and turned off the water, before he gently took hold of Will’s face, feeling his cheeks and forehead.

“Your temperature is elevated. How long have you been feeling sick for?”

Will’s lips parted in a silent gasp as Hannibal touched him, the physical touch and close proximity to an alpha both overwhelming and soothing at once.

“Don’t know…” Will murmured, and he closed his eyes as Hannibal gently pressed a wet, cold washcloth against his face and wrists. “I woke up a couple of minutes ago… I felt like I had a nightmare…”

Hannibal silently leaned in closer once more, his eyes briefly closed as he focused on Will's scent.

"I don't believe this is a relapse of your encephalitis."

He took another deep, slow breath, and found himself slightly baffled at the familiar kind of pheromones he smelled, almost entirely hidden underneath the layer of carefully balanced, chemical suppressants.

"Are you going into heat, Will?"

Will blinked up at him and scoffed.

"Don't be foolish… I've never missed a dose, and I'm not exactly the *nesting* type, am I?"

Slowly he rose to his feet and let himself be helped out of the tub, and into a big, fluffy and soft towel Hannibal held out for him.

"We should still consider all possibilities," Hannibal replied calmly. "Maybe it would be best for you to take some ibuprofen and try to sleep it off. We'll see about it again in the morning, when you are feeling more awake."

Will was vaguely aware of the arms wrapped around him, leading him back to his own bed, putting down fresh sheets for him and helping him into dry clothes.

He wondered how Hannibal was able to keep his professional wits about himself, given how often the lines between them had blurred in the past, back at home.

He had never before taken care of Will solely for the purpose of taking care of him, yet here, in Florence, where everything around them had changed, that aspect about him seemed to have changed as well.

Will pulled the fresh t-shirt down to his hips, aware of Hannibal's fleeting gaze as he regarded the prominent scars at Will's abdomen.

"What do you think about? When you see them?"

Hannibal looked at Will, his posture unchanged as he folded the sheets and towel in his arms.

"I think about whether I could have done a better job with the stitches. Then again, I know I could not have, given our circumstances."

Will had no memory of what had happened to him between Hannibal's kitchen and his arrival in Florence. Yet what he very clearly remembered was the way Hannibal had cared for him while they had settled in; the way he had cared for him, cleaned and bandaged his wounds, cooked for him, even bathed him in bed and trimmed his beard.

Hannibal had cared for him like a nurse. Like a friend. A partner.

Yet still, there was doubt in Will's mind. Doubt as to what ends his own intact physicality would serve for Hannibal. Doubt as to what plans he kept from him.

Will settled back into bed after Hannibal had handed him his medicine and some water, and left the conversation as brief as that.

"Try to get some sleep. Call me if you need anything, or if you feel worse."

Hannibal felt Will's cheeks and forehead again, the back of his fingers gently pressed against Will's skin. Will wondered if it was the contact he was eager to establish, and if Will's health might have been only secondary in that instance.

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When Will awoke the next morning he felt exhausted. His limbs were heavy as he dragged himself out of bed, vision blurry and his head throbbing with the foreboding pain of an oncoming headache.

Hannibal had already left for work, yet not without setting the table for Will, arranging a bowl of perfectly scrambled eggs, and coffee. Eggs without sausage, this time, Will noted.

As Will sat and ate he glanced at the morning newspaper and found a small note sitting on top of it.

It was an address, written down in Hannibal's precise cursive handwriting.

Will felt his mind begin to wander again, back to lectures and essays about penmanship, the analysis of evidence, the hastily scribbled clock faces in the notebooks he had burned with Hannibal.

He wondered what Hannibal's relationship with his other patients had been like. If they had had an amicable relationship, or an uncomfortable one. If people had found comfort in Hannibal's therapy as he once had, only to be traumatised by the violent end Hannibal had put to his practice in Baltimore.

Will swallowed dryly and put down the note, then washed down the slow build-up of envious, jealous bile with a big swig of coffee.

He cleaned off his table after he finished his eggs, took another pain killer, and made himself look presentable as soon as the pill had worked its magic.

Then Will grabbed the note of the address and set out onto the streets of Florence, making his way to wherever Hannibal would send him to.

It wasn't long before Will eventually found himself in front of a small pharmacy that looked like it had been in the family for decades, if not a century.

Calmly he entered, a small bell by the door announcing his presence, taking in the unfamiliar, yet intriguing interior.

A man stepped behind the counter and greeted Will amicably, almost too hastily for his brain to catch up with the Italian phrases.

It was only then that Will realised he had no idea what Hannibal had sent him there for.

"Ah… Buongiorno…", Will replied, still a bit puzzled, trying to piece together a sentence.

What the hell was the word for 'prescription', anyways?

"Ah!"

The man's face lit up with recognition upon the American accent in tandem with the appearance that had been described to him.

"You must be Dottore Fell's friend, sí?"

Will sighed with relief and smiled politely at the man.

"Yes, I am. He sent me here, to pick something up, I presume?"

The man gestured in agreement and briefly disappeared behind the ceiling-high shelves at the back, returning shortly after with a small bag.

"Take these every night, no exceptions. They should help with the fever."

Will checked the contents off the small bag and despite the Italian label, he was able to piece together the active agent of the medicine.

A rare, but potent heat suppressant.

Will felt his throat tighten with discomfort, angered at the way Hannibal had involved this stranger in his problems.

The man smiled apologetically, but kindly as he noticed the slightly soured expression on Will's face.

"You must not worry, signore. There is no shop you will find in all of Florence with better discretion than ours. For both you, and Dottore Fell, to do business here as you please."

Will nodded slowly and lowered the bag again.

"Thank you… how much?"

Will reached for his back pocket but the man smiled and waved at him once more.

"The Dottore already paid for you. Please let us know if there are any problems with the dosage so we can adjust to your liking and comfort."

“Thank you,” Will replied with a brief, polite smile and let his wallet slip back into his pocket, “That is very generous of you.”

“It is the least we can do for the Dottore and his friends,” the man replied amicably and bid Will goodbye as he left the pharmacy once more.

The dry afternoon heat was beginning to settle over the city as Will stepped out of the shop, taking the closest way home without realising his feet had already set into motion.

Will tightened his grip on the small pharmacy bag in his hand and found himself at odds with how to react.

Should he be appreciative and thankful to Hannibal for this obviously intrusive gesture, or follow his first instincts and close himself off once more, reaffirming his boundaries with the man he still could not entirely judge in all his intentions.

Will closed his eyes, the sun unusually blinding as he stepped out of the shadows, and decided that his thoughts would have to be postponed until after he had gotten adjusted to his new suppressants.

His symptoms of an impending heat were getting more frequent now, less easy to ignore, and after having taken such a long break from his heat cycles, he was not exactly looking forward to the prospect of dealing with one of them while in the company of Hannibal Lecter.

When Hannibal returned home that night after work and running his usual errands of shopping for groceries, he found that Will had already taken it upon himself to cook for them.

It was undoubtedly a dish Will had cooked many times before, not leaving his culinary comfort zone quite yet, but it smelled of something that Hannibal felt must have evoked one very specific emotion for Will: home.

“I didn’t know when you’d be back and I didn’t want the fish to go bad,” Will explained simply as Hannibal took his seat at the dinner table.

Hannibal smiled as he took off his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, sitting down opposite of Will.

“It smells wonderful,” Hannibal replied, aware of Will’s lingering gaze on his now bared forearms.

“You don’t usually dress down this much for dinner after work,” Will murmured, more to himself than to Hannibal.

Hannibal looked at him curiously, pouring them each a glass of white wine.

“You don’t usually cook. Especially not something so familiar and personal to you. I figured a less formal atmosphere would be in order.”

Will took a deep breath and raised his eyebrows.

“Well, I suppose I can never be quite sure with you either way, so I figure this is just as fitting.”

Hannibal looked at him silently, but with the lingering patience and waiting as he had done as Will’s psychiatrist.

“You believe I am manipulating you, or trying to intentionally make you feel safe so you will let your guard down. It scares you to be vulnerable with me.”

Will swallowed his bite of fish, trying not to let his reply sound too defensive.

“Would that surprise you?”

“I suppose not, no,” Hannibal replied calmly, then began to eat as well, “I assume it is a decent response to our personal relationship. The mistakes we have made in the past, the pains we have dealt each other. It was always underlying intentions that burdened us.”

“I feel… wounded right now,” Will replied calmly, but honestly. “I don’t know why I am experiencing heat symptoms. And it is not something I would prefer to continue to discuss with you.”

“Then we won’t.”

Will raised his gaze and met Hannibal’s deep, amber eyes, looking at him with distinct sincerity.

“I understand it is difficult for you to trust me, Will, especially after the circumstances that brought you here with me. From how you approach this topic I can tell that you have not shared your thoughts or feelings about your experiences as an omega with others in the past, probably less so an unmated alpha in your presence, and I have no right to intrude on those. I am, however, concerned. Medically speaking.”

“Professional interest?” Will replied calmly, almost a little too drily.

“More of a personal approach,” Hannibal remarked, “Especially with your more recent medical history.”

Will ate in silence for a while, yet he did not feel as pressured to shield himself from an impending conversation that night. Perhaps it was Hannibal’s words of reassurance, perhaps the energy he had to spend on dealing with the possibility of an impending heat had left him too exhausted to constantly be on guard.

Hannibal poured Will a glass of water, not wanting him to overindulge on alcohol in combination with his new suppressants.

“The unregulated shift in your hormones might be a symptom of emotional trauma you have endured, not only the physical one of your body.”

Will lowered his cutlery and looked at Hannibal for a long time.

They had not spoken of what had happened in Baltimore, the once so familiar area of Hannibal’s kitchen now veiled under heavy cloaks in the memories Will did not dare uncover. He did not dare pull back the sheets, look at the bodies and blood that lay underneath.

“I…” he began quietly, fixating on the rest of his dinner on his plate. “I think I’m starting to realise what happened all those months ago… It feels like the memories are returning, unpleasant and unwanted like the aura of a migraine…”

“Perhaps this is less of a conversation to be held over dinner, and more so a topic to be discussed in a safe, professional environment.”

Will swallowed drily, reaching for his water.

“You are part of the problem, Dr Lecter. Would that not create a very unhealthy and conflicted therapy environment?”

“It does not have to be me, if you don’t want it to be. It is all but an offer.”

Hannibal’s gaze trailed off, and for a moment he looked many, many miles away, swallowed by the depths of his memory palace.

“Perhaps it would aid us both. In some aspects, it might help you find a solution to your underlying problem.”

Will frowned with uncertainty.

“And what problem would that be?”

Hannibal set down his wine, and finally he had returned to the present when his eyes met Will’s.

“Whether you want to stay with me, or to leave me behind for good.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

cw // discussions of filicide

Classical music was playing softly in the background, lending a sense of familiarity to the nightly scene as Will stepped into their lounge area.

The two armchairs in front of the fireplace were now facing each other, the distance between them far enough for a comfortable sense of distance, yet close enough to create an intimate atmosphere, illuminated by the crackling flames of the fireplace.

"Have a seat, Will."

Will looked up to see Hannibal approaching him, opening the button of his suit jacket as he took his seat opposite Will by the fireplace.

Will swallowed dryly, watching the flames dance along the logs of wood as he felt a sense of calmness and safety overcome him. A safety of his former feelings towards Hannibal's therapy, overshadowed by the unwanted flashbacks of his medically induced memory loss.

Hannibal comfortably crossed his legs and folded his hands in his lap, allowing Will to adjust for a moment before calmly raising his voice.

"Where shall we begin?"

"It's the same question you asked me after I had come to you after my release from the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane… And I feel like it's a similar situation where we need to pick up."

"Would a murder disguised under the veils of self defence aid you in your desires of feeling righteous?"

"I don't need to feel righteous…" Will replied calmly, "Not tonight."

Hannibal nodded gently.

"We can begin with whatever you are comfortable with. Start anywhere you like, and we may work our ways backwards in time."

Will watched the flames for a moment, reminded of the day he had seen the notes on his own psychiatric sessions with Hannibal burn to ashes. Erasing their history from the patient

memory of the papers, never to be known by anyone but them. Then again, mostly Hannibal, as Will's memory would not serve him quite as well.

"Are they alive?" Will finally asked, gaze still fixed on the burning wood.

Hannibal took a deep, calm breath, not expecting Will to draw his attention away from the both of them.

"Yes," he replied finally, "I cannot speak of their current state for certain, yet both Alana and Jack seem to have recovered from the incidents at my former residence. Had they not, the papers or online articles surely would have mentioned their dramatic demise. Since coverage on the both of them has ceased, I assume they have resumed their ordinary lives once again."

Will nodded quietly, and a sense of relief overcame him.

"You seem tense, Will." Hannibal's eyes narrowed slightly. "You have been wondering about this for a long time. Why did you not ask sooner, or research about them yourself? Why wait for me to tell you about them?"

Will averted his gaze from the fire, yet he could not bear to look at Hannibal quite yet.

"I was afraid of bad news…" Will admitted quietly. "Your place was already a mess when I arrived, and since I could not be sure what had happened, it… It scared me to think about what else might have transpired."

"Are you feeling a sense of guilt?"

Hannibal seemed slightly confused upon the expression on Will's face.

"It… it feels like it was my fault. Everything that happened that night…"

Will shook his head slightly, not ready to confront his memories, hands tugging at the veils and cloaks, uncovering the crime scene where he had died his own death.

"You did send Jack after me," Hannibal replied calmly, professionally composed, "Surely, you were aware of the consequences. In leading him into my path, you accepted those consequences. And those it would have for you and me, should he not be able to succeed in either arresting or killing me."

Hannibal's final remark made Will frown, his hands slightly clenching at the edge of his armrests as he saw himself in his mind, hands gripping his gun tighter as he approached the kitchen of the house.

"What…?"

Will needed to sort himself for a moment. Hannibal allowed him to, his gaze resting on him quietly.

"You believe I came to kill you that night…?"

“Why else would you have followed Jack, if not to provide back-up? You had made your choice, and you chose the path of justice the FBI offered.”

“The gun I had with me wasn’t for *you*, Hannibal…”

The words felt heavy and difficult to spell out, to verbalise the instinctive fears that had crept up on Will as he had made his way through the dark house.

“I called you, remember? I didn’t call you to distract you. I wanted you to leave, and I *meant* it. I couldn’t decide if I was ready to leave with you… I couldn’t let the FBI arrest you, but I also did not want Jack to be harmed. That night, when I knew they were coming for you…”

Will trailed off, calming himself with a deep breath.

“Something clicked inside of me. Like a blown fuse, I just… I had this urge to run away *with* you. I didn’t think, I just… reacted.”

“You had previously made it clear that you had, in fact, no further intentions of doing so, Will. The most obvious indicator of all was your alliance with Freddie Lounds, if memory serves.”

Hannibal’s gaze remained distant, yet his posture seemed stiffened, as if he was suppressing the urge to move.

“That’s why you believed I had betrayed you…”

“You *had* betrayed me, Will. Belief has nothing to do with it.”

Will clenched his jaw, trying to suppress the anger.

Anger at himself, anger at Hannibal.

Anger at his inability to make a choice sooner, or convey his intentions more clearly.

Silence prevailed between them for a long time. Eventually, it was Will who broke it.

“It’s why you killed her, isn’t it? To punish me…”

“She…” Hannibal took a moment to find the right words. “She would have always posed a threat to my, or our existence. Abigail was a loose end neither of us could afford.”

“That’s how you thought of her? *A loose end*...? Evidence that needed to be destroyed…?”

Hannibal’s expression grew softer for a moment, yet grief and sadness remained reined in tightly by the man acutely aware of their dangerous potential.

“I had misplaced my hopes in her. She would have remained too unpredictable, too impulsive to-”

“To control,” Will finished his sentence for him through gritted teeth. “And so was I. Yet here I am.”

“What would you call it then, Will?” Hannibal replied, and this time, his question seemed to demand an honest answer, rather than merely a rhetorical one.

Will felt the words rise in his throat, choking him, silencing him until he was finally able to voice his thoughts.

“Spousal Revenge Filicide.”

Hannibal looked at Will, and the silence between them stretched until it became unbearably thin, the string of a violin pulled too tightly, ready to snap.

"From the very day Garret Jacob Hobbs had tried to kill her, it was you who made me see myself in her, Hannibal. It was my responsibility to deal with the guilt I felt for killing her father… but you made it our responsibility to *replace* him."

Hannibal shifted slightly, his gaze calm and professional, contrasting the emotion in Will's voice.

"Taking a man's life nearly broke you then. I saw potential in you. I was curious to see how you would handle yourself in this newly found position. A lone man, suddenly faced with the prospect of family. The prospect of reversing the clock of his own trauma."

"It must have greatly pleased you to learn about my parents, then," Will replied dryly, "Or rather, lack thereof."

"I was the first person you allowed yourself to be vulnerable with in a very long time, Will. You opened up about your fears. Your deepest, darkest urges you would not have otherwise dared to explore. I presume the intimacy this has lent to our relationship would have been equal to you in this scenario to a spousal relationship."

Will's jaw clenched as he averted his gaze, slowly and deeply exhaling, trying to rid himself of the scented memories of the blood in Hannibal's kitchen.

"It doesn't hurt you that I killed Abigail as much as it hurts you to admit that I killed what you saw of yourself in her."

"She still didn't deserve to die…"

"It was the only way to ensure our safety. Yours and mine."

"Mainly yours…"

Will fell silent again, and Hannibal seemed content in not further resuming the topic.

"Why did you take me with you…?"

Will finally looked at Hannibal again, discomfort crawling under his skin as he looked into his eyes, taking in all of the man opposite him, being confronted with the raw, unfiltered reality of Hannibal from the intense colour of his eyes, the lingering scent of the harmony of his aftershave and pheromones, the crisp, perfectly tailored suit he wore.

Will blinked and the room began to swim before his eyes, panic swelling in his chest as he felt himself rip the cloaks off the memories hidden in Hannibal's house, opening his mind up to the memories, the wounds he was not ready to face yet.

"Don't answer that," he hastily added, burying his face in his hands, trying to avoid the impending panic attack, his heartbeat hammering in his chest, echoing in his limbs, thumping behind his closed eyes.

"In case it is any consolation to you, I have no intentions of harming you, Will. I understand it is difficult for you to trust my words, however I have no intention of using you as a human shield towards any national or international authorities."

Hannibal's expression softened once more, his voice not giving away the sadness in his eyes, hidden from view as long as Will was too focused on himself.

"I have told you many times that you are not my prisoner. You are not my hostage. You are free to leave me as you please, Will."

Will gasped softly, trying to suppress the sobs that worked their way up his throat, unable to articulate a response. He swallowed them down painfully, forcing himself out of his anxious state of mind, using the last of his strength to build pillars of forts, close the doors, pull himself out of Hannibal's old house, away from his own crime scene.

"I believe we should resume our session another time," Hannibal replied calmly, but with a gentle firmness that eased Will's mind, ceasing the threat of questions he wasn't ready to deal with.

When Will finally opened his eyes again Hannibal stood before him, handing him a glass of water.

"Thank you…" Will muttered, taking the glass from him and emptying it quickly.

"Speaking to you as your friend, not as a medical professional… I find it difficult to be around you when you are in distress."

"Because you don't feel empathy the way I do…?"

"Because as your friend, it is my first instinct to soothe you with scent and touch."

Will looked at Hannibal again, finally allowing himself to perceive him with all his senses once more. He swallowed dryly.

"As would be expected from an alpha in the presence of an unmated omega…"

"Not every conventional expectation needs to be met, I believe that is something we have established quite well. However, I cannot deny that a heightened sense of smell complicates the matter of our dynamic."

Will thought back to the moment when, in hindsight, it had become so stupidly clear to him that Hannibal had smelled his encephalitis on him long before he had even heard the diagnosis himself.

"I'm not sure what to say…" Will replied honestly.

He took a deep breath, sinking back into his arm chair.

"I do not wish to make you feel inferior to the ways of our nature, Will," Hannibal replied calmly, pouring himself a glass of wine before he resumed his seat opposite Will. "I am aware of both the healing effects an alpha such as myself might have on you, yet also the violation of boundaries it might pose to you."

Will turned his glass in his hand, a feeling just shy of chills ran under his skin as he thought back to other instances when Hannibal had touched him.

His cheek. His back. His hands.

The intimate spot at the back of his neck.

"I know the effect you're talking about. I've felt it with you before…" Will replied quietly. "You seemed to know what I needed better than I did. It… centred me. Clearing my head when I didn't seem to find my way out of the fog."

Will raised his gaze, and found Hannibal’s eyes to be lingering on him with curiosity.

"Yet for every fond touch, it seems we have repaid the gesture in violence and pain to each other tenfold. Nothing between us is ever simple enough."

"It could be."

Will returned Hannibal's smile, both of them painfully aware of the complicated lives they had come to live together, threads of life and fate entangled and knotted, neither of them able to distinguish where one ended and the other began.

"I suppose only time will tell."

Chapter 5

Will took a deep breath as he exited the small shop *Vera Dal*, the cool breeze forecasting the rain a welcome change to his senses.

He could hear thunder rumbling in the distance, and the first few drops of rain hit the warm ground around him as he made his way home, engulfing him in the unique and welcome scent of petrichor.

It was days like this Will had come to enjoy most, days that resembled the cold and wet seasons of his former home, and brought a welcome change to his routine.

Will shook his dampened hair out of his face and closed the apartment door behind himself, the scent of fresh herbs, vegetables and seasoned meat reaching him from the kitchen, beckoning him to come closer.

He hung up his coat to dry and picked the fancy shopping bag back up, delivering it to Hannibal in the kitchen.

"I hope this is the right vintage. I think I mumbled my order too much…"

Hannibal put down his knife and reached into the bag Will offered. He smiled as he inspected the bottle of wine.

"It's perfect. Thank you for taking the time to pick up my order."

Will nodded and stepped closer, inspecting the contents of the pans and pots in return.

"It smells delicious…"

Will halted his motions, confused.

There was another, different scent lingering in the kitchen, as soothing and pleasant as a freshly cut bouquet of flowers.

He looked at Hannibal for a moment, realising that it was his scent that had changed, evolved like the different scent levels of a masterfully crafted perfume, revealing the heart that lay beneath the fleeting first impression.

"Will? Is something the matter?"

Hannibal looked at him with amicable concern, putting aside the order of white truffles.

"You…" Will stalled, then decided to speak his mind freely rather than avoid the question. "You smell different."

Hannibal gave a slow nod in return, accompanied by a gentle smile. To Will's surprise, it was him who prolonged the pause before an answer now.

"I had intended to discuss this with you over dinner, as I had not believed it to become an issue of conversation quite so soon."

"You're not sick, are you…?"

Hannibal's smile widened slightly as he heard the honest concern in Will's voice, diverting his attention back to his cooking, trying not to focus on the beautiful blend of warm rain and Will's scent, hidden deep underneath the suppressants.

"No. No, I am not. However, it is a personal matter that may affect us both, hence my desire to have this conversation with you."

Will paused for a moment, leaning against the table, watching Hannibal cook.

He closed his eyes, and a strange, heavy sensation overcame him as realisation did.

"You're going into rut."

"It would seem so. Yes."

Hannibal kept his tone light and conversational, yet the way he avoided Will's eyes felt unusual. Strange. Foreign between the two.

Will nodded slowly, more to himself than to Hannibal.

"I don't think I've ever noticed before… I know this makes me sound like a self-centred prick, but I don't remember ever having picked up on this kind of change in your scent before."

"You did not," Hannibal agreed, turning off the heat and plating their dinner. "Though I certainly find more restraint within myself than others, who may indulge in making their nature their sole reason for unreasonable behaviour, I do abide by certain rules. In Baltimore, those rules extended to me not scheduling appointments with omega patients during a rut cycle."

"You've never taken suppressants, then?" Will furrowed his brows incredulously.

"Only in my times of on-call duty as an emergency surgeon. I did prefer to create a safe space among patients whose circumstances were unpredictable. Otherwise, I prefer to keep my instincts sharp and unaltered by chemical suppressants."

Will saw the flickering lights of the projector in front of himself, the crime scene photos enlarged, looming over him from behind as he taught at the academy.

"And did those rut cycles coincide with the Ripper killings?"

Hannibal smiled to himself at the challenging, but curious tone in Will's voice.

"Not all of them," he replied with a calm smile, now directed at Will. He took their plates and motioned for Will to lead the way into the dining area. "Shall we?"

Will took his seat at the table and waited for Hannibal, marvelling at the beautiful arrangement of their dinner.

"It looks delicious. Thank you."

"My pleasure," Hannibal replied calmly, taking his seat opposite Will.

They ate in comfortable silence for a while, before Will decided to pick up the conversation again.

"In case you felt the need to ask, I don't mind."

Will looked at Hannibal, who once more regarded him with great interest and curiosity.

"This is your apartment more than it is mine. I can give you space if you need me to."

Hannibal cut off a piece of meat, trying to suppress his amusement.

"You believe I wanted to ask for your blessing to satisfy my sexual needs within this shared space, akin to the escapades within a university dormitory?"

Will felt the heat of embarrassment rise to his cheeks, completely losing his footing in the conversation.

"I… believed that would be the polite thing to offer."

"I appreciate your generosity," Hannibal smirked, "Yet this is not the turn I intended for this conversation to have."

He took a sip of wine, giving Will more time to feel like he had made the greatest fool of himself.

As he sat his glass back on the table, his grin had simmered back down into a genuine smile.

"I wanted to discuss this with you, so you could express your comfort and discomfort around the topic, so that we may come to a mutual understanding of how to best deal with the situation."

"Oh…" Will swallowed dryly, prolonging his turn to reply with another bite of food.

"Well… I suppose as long as I take suppressants, unwanted instinctual attraction should be out of the question. But…"

"They have not been the most reliable tool for you recently," Hannibal verbalised his concern, "I understand."

"I think it would be best if I left for the time being. I don't think it would be worth the risk of trying, given how unpredictable our relationship has been in the past…"

Hannibal did not reply, calmly taking a sip of his wine.

“Is it still hurting? Your abdomen?”

Will fell silent for a moment, not expecting the sudden change of topic.

“It feels… okay.”

Hannibal nodded.

“I presume your suggestion is worth considering. With the bloodshed we have dealt each other, it might be best to approach this new situation with caution. At least until you are fully recovered.”

Will took another bite of his food, and there was a silent understanding between them as their eyes met.

“To be clear, I don’t pay mind to the social constructs people choose to abide by. My feelings about sharing a space with you are not tied to whether you are an alpha or not.”

“Given our history and your character, I believed as much”, Hannibal replied with a simple smile, “However, I do still appreciate you saying it.”

Will nodded.

Hannibal smiled and took another sip of his wine, savouring it.

“Since we are to part ways temporarily, I will be sure to see you off with a proper dinner.”

Will raised his glass.

“I’m looking forward to it…”

—

That night Will awoke clutching the sheets, gripping them so tightly his fingers ached. He could barely open his eyes, chest heaving in an effort to get oxygen back into his system, every inch of naked skin sticking to his bedding with sweat.

Dizzy and shivering Will forced himself upright, gulping down the water he took from his nightstand.

He felt hot, too hot to stand the very spot he had just laid in, aching for a cool relief to his burning skin.

The room spun around him as he got up too fast, and it took him several seconds to compose himself enough to continue walking.

As he stumbled through the darkness of the apartment his steps were accompanied by the sounds of wind and rain, tapping impatiently at the windows he passed.

Will exhaled with relief as he reached the bathroom, cold water hitting his skin, cooling his arms and face, dripping down onto his chest.

Will clawed his way out of his sweat-soaked t-shirt, throwing it aside before he grabbed a towel, wetting it to cool himself off more.

For a while he stood there, damp, cold towel pressed against his face before he finally turned off the water again, only to be startled by the presence of an unbearably warm hand on his back.

"Will? Are you okay?"

Will didn't have the strength to reply, nor to fight the way Hannibal wrapped a clean, dry towel around his shoulders.

"Hot…" Will mumbled, focusing on trying to keep his eyes open and himself from fainting, allowing Hannibal to pull him into a gentle embrace.

One of Hannibal's hands reached the back of his neck, holding him, positioning him closer to the crook of Hannibal's neck.

Will felt an instantaneous relief to his high-strung senses, inhaling the alpha pheromones Hannibal offered, finally putting out the fires reigning his body.

Will nuzzled his face closer to Hannibal's neck, almost too close for comfort, yet a transgression easily forgiven by his dire state.

Will let himself be held, and soothed, and calmed by Hannibal’s presence, by the pleasant spike in his scent Will had smelled for the first time only hours before.

"You should have told me you weren't feeling well…" Hannibal said quietly, holding onto Will for as long as he needed, as long as he allowed him to.

Will finally felt well enough to form coherent thoughts once more, let alone speak, bringing distance between himself and Hannibal again. He pulled the big, fluffy towel around himself tighter, suddenly embarrassed by his dishevelled appearance.

"I didn't feel sick when I went to bed…" Will explained, trying to make sense of his sudden change in well-being. "I suppose I must have had another nightmare…"

Will looked at Hannibal, his gaze lingering on his neck, the spot where he was sure he had sensed his pulse only moments ago.

They were only a few steps apart, yet Hannibal felt further away than ever before, the intimacy they had just shared too fragile to imitate once more.

"I will get you some fresh sheets. Are you sure you will be okay on your own?"

Will nodded, and Hannibal exited the bathroom, leaving Will behind with a dull ache deep inside his belly, a sense of loss at the absence of the soothing pheromones Hannibal provided.

He took a few deep, shaky breaths, trying to clear his head.

There was a deep, instinctual feeling inside of him that longed for yet another touch to the sensitive spot at the back of his neck, the reassuring embrace, the overflow of pheromones that made him feel truly okay for the first time ever since he had learned the truth about Hannibal.

Will finally felt steady enough to set one foot in front of the other, following Hannibal back to his own bedroom.

Suppressants or not, Will struggled with the reality that he did not mind the attention and affection Hannibal gave him. He had always known that no matter how much he wrapped himself in a thick sheet of protective loneliness, he had the desire to connect.

Like the fungi that had inspired Eldon Stammets reaching out to one another, Will had never felt more at ease when he realised how much Hannibal accepted him, and never more abandoned when he had realised the extent Hannibal was willing to go to for the sake of curiosity and self-preservation, even regarding Will.

When Will entered the bedroom, Hannibal had just finished changing his sheets.

"I'll get you some more water," Hannibal said calmly, taking the dirty sheets with him as he left for the kitchen.

Will nodded and grabbed a fresh shirt from his wardrobe in the meantime.

"Thank you… I'm sorry for constantly waking you in the middle of the night. I thought I would feel better with these new suppressants."

"Perhaps you need to allow yourself to adjust to them for a little longer," Hannibal replied, setting a water carafe down on Will's nightstand, "And there is no need for you to apologise. I am greatly concerned with your health and would rather know if you needed my help."

Will's reply did not make it past his lips, stopped by the gentle touch of Hannibal's hand to his forehead.

"You don't seem to have a fever," Hannibal smiled reassuringly, "If there is anything else that you need, let me know."

"Thank you…" Will finally replied, bidding Hannibal good night as he quietly left his room again.

Will turned off the lights and curled up in bed, pulling the sheets so high as if to hide himself under them.

Will was aware that with Hannibal being his only close contact in the city, his feelings may be entirely circumstantial; the attachment he felt may be solely rooted in him being isolated

from everything that had tied him to his former life in Baltimore.

Hannibal would be in an extraordinarily opportunistic situation to manipulate Will as he pleased, yet at the same time, his words still rang true. Will was free to come and go as he pleased, and Hannibal never questioned him. On the contrary, he seemed delighted whenever Will spoke of new spots throughout the city that he had discovered and that he took interest in.

Will sighed and reached for the towel he had just discarded, curling up around it, enjoying the fleeting sensation of Hannibal's soothing scent that lingered on it.

He would worry about Hannibal after a few more restful hours of sleep.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> Bedelia's original quote shall forever remain iconic. However, I did have way too much fun writing this chapter as I tried to put my own little spin on it, and I hope you'll enjoy a little more heat to this slow burn!🤭
>
> x ira

When Will woke up the next morning, the first thing he noticed was the towel lying next to him in bed, a not so subtle reminder of how desperately he had held onto it as he had fallen asleep.

Will's fingers grazed the fluffy, soft fabric, and as he held it to his face, he found that his own scent had entirely masked whatever had remained of Hannibal.

Will stared at the white cotton for a while as if to find a revelation hidden in its woven fabric, a comforting advice among the threads as to how to deal with the events of last night.

For a while, all Will could remember was the heat, then the cold, the abrupt change in temperature making him shiver even more, before he remembered Hannibal’s touch. The way he had cared for him, had made sure he was comfortable, despite the difficult talk about Abigail they had had.

Will sighed, aching for the comfort and distraction his dogs would have provided right about now, and finally dragged himself out of bed in search of some coffee.

He chose to enjoy his cup of morning coffee standing by the window, watching the comings and goings of people in the piazza, between the two rows of houses that led to the church of Santa Maria Novella.

Will enjoyed the view of the beautiful architecture he was provided, the signs of the Italian renaissance all over the city. Though he doubted that he shared an appreciation for history and the arts quite as much as Hannibal did, he wondered if it was the sense of rebirth the city's art presented that had made Hannibal choose Florence for his new beginning. His new life. A life he had chosen to begin with Will.

Will felt shivers run down his spine at the thought, the uneasiness of uncertainty still too present, too deeply rooted in his bones to ignore.

He needed to remind himself that there had come a point in his old life where this had been exactly what he wanted. He had *wanted* to agree to Hannibal's proposal. To leave everything and everyone behind, and only allow himself to follow his own, true nature, with Hannibal by

his side to help him understand. To witness the change Will still fought and feared, the design that would be so undoubtedly his.

It should have been easier, now that Hannibal had made the decision for him. That he had forgiven him for his betrayal and insecurities, the choices he had made that had sealed both of their fates.

Will took a deep breath, drying his lashes with a quick motion of his hand.

If he came to accept these choices, he would need to do so again, and on his own terms. He needed to accept himself as much as he did Hannibal.

And to do so, he needed to figure out where to begin.

—

When Will returned from his evening walk, he found the dining table to be set with the most exquisite dishes, a tableaux so elaborate and enticing as he had barely seen Hannibal cook in Florence.

"You meant it when you said you would arrange a parting feast…" Will mumbled, gaze wandering along the different delicacies.

He frowned slightly as he spotted the third set of plates.

"Are we expecting company?"

Hannibal returned from the kitchen with yet another plate of food, dressed neatly in one of his finest suits.

"His name is Antony Dimmond. He used to be a teaching assistant at Cambridge University to the now recently appointed curator of the Capponi."

Hannibal set the plate down in its designated place on the table, and Will could tell that this would be no ordinary dinner guest.

"Rather, to the curator I now claim to be."

Will inhaled sharply, his heart beating heavily in his chest as he felt the entire room around him shift.

Their safe space in Florence had now become a stage, a courtroom where their fate would soon be decided.

"How much does he know?"

Hannibal met Will's tense body language with one of confident ease, a perfect mask to his person suit.

"I have met him once before, in Paris, under a different name while I was still in the process of procuring our new identities. When I met him again at the library here in Florence, he knew at once that I had taken Fell's identity. However, he does not seem to know my true identity." Hannibal smiled, and there was confidence, almost eager playfulness in his eyes. "I doubt he would have agreed to dinner with me otherwise."

Maybe it was Hannibal's confidence, maybe it was the way he openly joked with Will again, like he once had back in Baltimore when he had been eager to earn his trust; whatever it was, it made Will's skin tingle with anticipation, and curved the corners of his mouth into the faintest smile.

He looked to the door as he heard the doorbell ring, announcing their guest, then back to Hannibal.

"I'll go put on a nice shirt…"

When Will returned to the dining area he found their guest to be already seated at the head of the table.

A subtle sense of pride overcame him when he noticed that Hannibal had taken off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves, undoubtedly matching the more casual style Will preferred. The *why* offered itself only a moment later as their guest raised his voice once more.

"And won't Mrs. Fell be joining us tonight?"

Fell was married.

The connection snapped in Will's head so quickly, his blood pumping with the excitement, the thrill and danger of their charade.

If Hannibal was to kill the man seated between them by the end of the night either way, Will might as well enjoy embracing the opportunity to re-introduce himself as someone else.

"That would be me," Will replied calmly, but with an edge of tension to his voice, as if to preemptively oppose any negative reaction his revelation might evoke.

Will's gaze lingered on Antony Dimmond as he took his seat opposite Hannibal, yet even from the corners of his eyes he could see the amusement and satisfaction in Hannibal's smile that Will had chosen to play along quite so creatively.

"My apologies…" There was an honest expression of surprise and embarrassment in Dimmond's features as he turned his attention to Will, adjusting to the new information, before the casual smile returned to his face, "Would that be Dr. or Mr. …?"

"Ganzer," Will replied calmly, "Jack Ganzer. And mister is just fine."

"I see…" The smile on Antony's face grew wider as he looked at both men sitting beside him, "It's a shame, really. I am afraid I have to admit that I cannot remember Dr. Fell mentioning

you."

"The members of the Studiolo were already sceptical and partially hostile towards a non-Italian applicant for the job of the curator," Will replied calmly but matter of factly, watching Hannibal arrange an assortment of dishes for him to try on his plate, "I am sure you understand that my husband and I preferred to not let our relationship be the defining factor in their decision making, rather than his knowledge and academic abilities."

Will met Hannibal's gaze, and for the briefest of moments he was sure he smelled a tinge of pride in his scent.

Hannibal served Will's plate and took his seat again.

"It looks delicious. Thank you…"

Will smiled at Hannibal amicably, in a way so lovingly Hannibal easily responded in kind before he, too, turned towards Antony again.

"I trust that you would treat this information with the necessary amount of confidentiality, especially in the halls of the Capponi."

"Oh, naturally," Antony replied, before breaking into a small chuckle, "I could only imagine the incredulous faces of some of those men, noses buried too deeply in their books of old to embrace the new ways in which the world has adapted. If they found out, I am sure there would be many more open spots at the Capponi, all of them swooning in self-righteous indignation."

Will gave a short, polite smile before he focused on his food once more, his senses only heightened by his underlying anxiety, the anticipation of whether this dinner conversation would take a deadly turn at some point.

"It tastes incredible. You've truly outdone yourself, darling…"

Hannibal could hear the faintest remainders of the Southern drawl in Will's voice as the pet name slipped from his lips, easy and smooth, like he had called him by that name a thousand times before.

"It is always my pleasure to cook for you, my love."

If the sensation of calling Hannibal by an endearing term had already been an unforeseen thrill to Will's system, it was nothing compared to the feeling of finding the tables being turned on him.

Will clutched his cutlery a little tighter, took a moment longer to take a sip from his drink, trying to extinguish the heat he felt rise up inside his gut.

Much to his relief, the sensation soon subsided as Hannibal engaged Antony in a conversation more pertaining towards their shared profession, allowing Will to fully slip back into character by the time Hannibal served them fresh oysters.

To Hannibal's concealed surprise, Will not only knew his way around the more messy process of catching and preparing fish, but also the delicate ritual of eating oysters, perfectly composed and sure of himself.

Will raised the shell to his lips and tilted, and taking one, two, three slow, savouring bites, releasing all the subtle flavours of the flesh combined with the fine lemon sauce Hannibal had made, he swallowed the meat of the oyster.

"Do you not enjoy seafood, Jack?" Antony smiled in an effort to show sympathy, taking Will's slow pace as an indicator of hesitation rather than delight.

Will smiled as he looked down at his plate, gently loosening the flesh of another oyster with the tiny fork.

"It took me a while to learn that my husband only appreciates a swift and seamless swallow in the appropriate circumstances. I'd rather not get lectured again upon not fully savouring the taste of the delicacies he has taken so much effort to prepare, and for me to taste..."

Will raised the oyster shell to his lips and let the meat of it glide into his mouth, and when he set down the empty shell on his plate again, he could not tell which reaction of both men opposite him thrilled him more.

Antony Dimmond appeared to be speechless for a moment, entirely stopped in his tracks at Will's unforeseen reply.

When Will looked at Hannibal, however, his expression and the subtle, yet very noticeable spike in his scent made him think of the calm before a storm. The tension in the air just before lightning strikes the ground.

There was a smile of amusement on his lips, yet the expression in his eyes as he regarded Will had become darker, deeper, almost dangerous. Will could not tell for certain if Hannibal had found his comment to be entirely too rude, or whether the alpha inside of him had taken over, reigning silently over his senses, awoken by the vulgar language of the omega opposite him in his already agitated state of impending rut.

Antony watched the non-verbal exchange of the men he perceived to be husbands, and when both of them turned their attention to him instead, a slow, thrilling chill ran down the beta's spine.

"Is it that kind of party?"

Will immediately picked up on the delight, the playfulness masking his genuine interest, and the very real authoritative impression Hannibal had left on him, making him painfully aware of his status at their dinner table.

Will looked from Antony to Hannibal and smiled, awaiting his reaction.

Hannibal smiled back at Will, yet the expression on his face had become polite rather than amicable as he turned to Dimmond.

"I assure you, it is not that kind of party."

Antony chuckled, eyeing Will for a moment longer than Hannibal would have appreciated.

"A shame, really… You are both suddenly so delightfully interesting."

Will smiled, taking another sip of his drink.

“Trust me, my husband is far more interesting than I am…”

It was only when the beta had left and Hannibal had closed the door behind him, bidding him goodbye and a good night, that Will could truly sense the change in Hannibal’s scent in the air.

The scent that he usually perceived to be that of a calming blend of lavender and sandalwood had grown in intensity, another layer added to it that smelled of the fine notes of bergamot.

“Are you disappointed, Will?”

Will joined Hannibal in the kitchen, carrying plates from the dinner table with him.

“I don’t think disappointed is an appropriate word for it,” Will replied calmly, letting the dirty dishes sink into the hot, soapy water in the kitchen sink, “Surprised, I suppose. I was sure you were going to kill him at some point throughout the evening…”

“I meant if you were disappointed that I did not intend for him to spend the night. You seemed rather taken with him.”

Will chuckled quietly at the flippant undertone to Hannibal’s words, his amusement only enhanced by the domestic image of them both, sharing the chore of doing the dishes.

“Honestly, it was quite the opposite…”

Will froze as he felt Hannibal’s body press up to him from behind, trapping him between himself and the sink.

“And if I had played along with your flirtatious advances? Did you carefully consider the consequences of your actions, my love…?”

Will felt chills run down his spine at the subtle growl that accompanied Hannibal’s last few words, leaving no doubt that the alpha in him had indeed felt challenged to a degree Will would not have put past the limitations of his self-control before.

Beneath the surface of the water Will’s fingers curled tighter around the handle of one of the steak knives, and as he slightly turned his head to reply he smelled Hannibal’s scent so clearly he felt the same deep, instinctual sensation of heat in his gut as he had during dinner.

“Judges, orderlies, law enforcement… You have always made sure that you were the only one who had the most intimate access to me and my life. I doubt that a TA would have been an exception to that rule for you…”

“So you trust in me being the only person close enough to reach you? To touch you?”

Will tensed as he felt Hannibal’s arm around him, his hand placed on his abdomen, pressing right against the spot where his claws had ripped through Will’s skin all those months ago.

Will felt like the air was knocked out of him, knees slightly buckling only for him to sink further against Hannibal, into the embrace that had once been an almost fatal one.

Will closed his eyes as he held onto the knife so hard his fingers ached, feeling both caught and utterly lost in the unruly sea of feelings in his mind, tugging at him from all different directions.

“Yes…”

His response was quiet, so raw and vulnerable in its honesty that it took them both by surprise.

Will swallowed dryly as the gravity of his unintentional confession finally reached his conscious mind, making him almost embrace the warmth of Hannibal’s hand against his stomach, feeling his heart beat heavier in his chest with anticipation and anxiety.

Will could sense the intensity and edge to Hannibal’s scent disappear only a heartbeat before Hannibal let go of him, backing off in a smooth, swift motion, taking just one step aside to resume his chore beside Will.

Hannibal avoided Will’s gaze as he dried the dishes, yet his expression and tone had grown softer once more, genuine rather than provoking.

“Much like you, I had anticipated for this dinner to reach a different conclusion. I have no right to take my frustration about Antony Dimmond out on you, and I carelessly overstepped your boundaries. I apologise, Will.”

Will took a deep breath, centering himself again slowly, focusing back on cleaning the dishes and laying them out for Hannibal to dry.

“It was a long, tense night for both of us… And I know you have rarely killed anyone since we arrived here, Hannibal.”

Will looked over at him, watching him dry the blade of the knife Will had held onto so tightly only a moment ago.

“I know that these urges don’t just go away because you want them to. And with an impending rut, I… I understand how it feels. The heightened senses and emotions that come with it. I imagine they only amplify these urges even more, which makes it all the more frustrating to resist them…”

Hannibal finally looked at Will again, and felt seen by him in a way he had not experienced in a very long time.

“Thank you, Will. I appreciate it…”

Will nodded slightly and allowed a playful smile back onto his lips, feeling more at ease with Hannibal once more.

“Just try not to kill anyone in the living room, darling. You know what that mess does to the carpet…”

The way Hannibal looked at him was proof enough for Will that the feeling seemed to be mutual.

Chapter 7

The sun had only crept over the hills in the far distance, just awakening above the city of Florence when Will set down an envelope at the breakfast table he had laid for Hannibal.

Then he shouldered his bag and quietly left the apartment, grabbing a quick breakfast near the train station for himself before he boarded one of the first trains that would take him out of Italy, northeast bound towards the country that Hannibal had once called his home, and that was entirely alien to him now.

Will had wanted Hannibal to know that he would return to Florence soon. Yet he also felt that he owed it to Hannibal to utilise the time they would spend apart during his rut, and to learn of the sides to the man that was and shaped Hannibal Lecter in the way Will had come to know him in Baltimore.

Perhaps the most suitable place for Will to start was at the very beginning.

—

After an almost full day of travel, Will had finally found an opportunity to sleep a few hours away from his final destination, lucky enough to have gotten a double room on the final connecting night train to himself.

When Will awoke just short of midnight he felt hot and dizzy in the small space, staring at the narrow ceiling above him in the darkness.

It took him a moment to adjust, to notice the different subtle smells of the old train cabin around himself that seemed eager to dispel the scents of lavender, sandalwood and bergamot that lingered in Will's nose, following him from his dream.

Will licked his dry lips and pushed the hair out of his face that stuck to his forehead with sweat.

His other hand rested on his abdomen, feeling not only the heat of his skin underneath his fingers, but also the heat that pooled in his gut once more, burning him from the inside out.

Will felt sweaty and uncomfortable, and it didn't take long for him to notice the change that had evaded him in his barely awoken state of mind.

He pushed his hand lower, underneath the waistband of his pyjama pants, and a breathless moan escaped his lips as he felt the hot slick between his thighs, the way his half-hard member twitched with excitement, desperate for his attention.

Will was sure he had taken his suppressants properly the night before, yet apparently even the stronger dose could not keep him from experiencing wet dreams like a hormonal teenager.

Will tried desperately not to think about the encounter he had had with Hannibal the night before, that brief, fleeting moment of surrender, almost submission he had experienced, yet the scent of Hannibal's rut pheromones was too enticing, too arousing for him to ignore.

"Fuck…" Will cursed under his breath, damning himself, his thoughts, his body for craving and desiring Hannibal so deeply in a way that his emotions and conscious mind had not been able to catch up with yet.

Will knew he was too far gone at this point, desperate to rest and go back to sleep, so he got as comfortable as he could on the narrow bed, suppressing another moan as he finally wrapped his hand around himself, using his own slick and precum to make the glide easier.

Will bit down on his lip harder as he felt not only the involuntary memories of scent return, but also bits and pieces of physical contact he had had with Hannibal.

The way he held him by his neck from behind, or placed his hand by the narrow of Will's back.

The way he had pulled him closer to his own neck, offering him an incredibly vulnerable spot just for the sake of soothing him.

The way he had held him and touched him when Will was still recovering from his wounds, bathing him in bed and making sure he was well taken care of.

Finally, the way his whole body had lined up so seamlessly with Will from behind, engulfing him in his frame, dominating his personal space in a way Will would have never dared to ask for-

Will moaned hoarsely as he came, slick and cum spilling over his hands, his cock still twitching desperately at the sheer memory of Hannibal placing his hand onto his scars.

Will gasped softly, desperate for air, trying to fight off the impending clarity and guilt, the shame and confusion, the fact that after barely getting himself off for months, it was the thought of Hannibal that finally sent him over the edge.

Rut pheromones be damned.

Will scrambled for a couple of tissues and cleaned himself up, and much to his surprise, he managed to quickly fall asleep for another couple of hours before he would have to face the bleak reality of Hannibal's past.

—

The ground was soft beneath Will’s feet as he exited his rented jeep, parking just out of view of the closest streets and at a safe distance from the Lecter estate, unsure of what to expect.

He shouldered his bag and turned up the collar of his coat against the chilly air, feeling the moisture of the fog and cold on his skin.

After so many months in the Italian climate he had almost forgotten what that kind of weather felt like, the sort of moist, bone-chilling cold that easily made you feel like you would never be warm again.

The earth felt soft and muddy beneath his feet, a path untread by vehicles and people alike as he approached the iron gates of the Lecter estate.

When Will spotted the rusting family crest, aged with years and sorrow, he could not help but think of the first instance he had ever spent time alone with Hannibal, sleepy and weary of the stranger opposite him in his small, dingy motel room as they shared the breakfast Hannibal had brought.

And how do you see me?

The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by.

Seeing both animals represented upon the family crest made Will pause for a moment, allowing himself to become deeply aware of Hannibal's perception of him.

Even when they had only barely known each other, strangers who had gotten off on the wrong foot, forced together by fate, circumstances, and Jack Crawford, Hannibal had sensed a connection to Will.

Maybe even a sense of familiarity.

Of belonging.

Home.

Will averted his eyes from the gates and looked beyond, to the mansion in the distance that must have resembled a castle in its heydays.

Will looked at the chains at the gate, but the thought of returning to the rental car to get a tool to break them seemed laughably rude and inappropriate.

As Hannibal had overcome the forts Will had pulled up all around him, Will would now climb the walls that hid beyond them the darkest memories of Hannibal, ones not even he dared to visit all too deliberately.

When Will approached the house he mourned for the place he had never seen, never experienced when it had been lived in, enjoyed by its occupants, gardens and woods cared for, a family coming together to build the space they shared and called home.

The closer Will got to the mansion, the more he felt being watched, a piercing gaze at the back of his neck, like the buildings themselves were becoming aware of him, the intruder and destroyer of their peace.

He tried a few doors and windows, yet finding them locked he decided to explore the grounds a little further, eventually reaching a small lake.

The waters were overgrown with reeds near the shore, a small dock at the opposite side of the lake withered away with time and negligence.

Will felt the swing of the pendulum behind his eyes, inviting the fabricated memory of two children playing by the dock, joyful and carefree, with the older boy not parting from his younger sister's side.

"What happened to you here, Hannibal…?"

When Will opened his eyes he saw Hannibal next to him, eyes aimed at the far distant memories, across the dark waters he did not dare cross.

His expression changed, saddened and woeful as he seemed to follow Will's gaze, watching the last joyful memories he had shared with his sister before him.

"I happened."

Will contemplated reaching out to him, wanting to soothe him in his grief and sorrow, yet the image of Hannibal dissolved before him, lost in the fog as were the children playing across the lake.

Will turned around and headed back to the main house, exploring it with the care and circumspection one might use to tread among the ancient artefacts of a museum.

As the sun went down, making Will's torch the only source of light for miles around, he found himself accompanied by the lightning bugs dancing between the trees, adding a more bewitching atmosphere to the estate.

Treading lightly in the darkness Will wondered if this was the scenery Hannibal kept in his memory palace: dark, foreboding woods, the alluring spectacle of insects, beckoning him closer with a false sense of security, deeper and deeper into the undergrowth of the forest.

Will stood there for a moment, the lights of his torch switched off, and simply allowed himself to exist in the same space Hannibal's family once had.

He found comfort in the similarities to his home back in Wolf Trap, Virginia. The quiet of the forest, only ever disturbed by the sound of animals equally awakening and searching for a spot to rest for the night. The smells of nature, images in his mind unbroken, untouched by mankind, raw and wild and free. He envied them, yet enjoyed the time he got to spend among the wilderness all the more for it.

With a deep, slow breath Will opened his eyes again to the world around him.

A gentle wave of chills ran down his back as he watched the black antlers of the ravenstag appear among the branches of the trees, approaching him slowly, hot breath fogging in the cool night air. The stag was coming towards him on steady, strong legs, summoned once again from the depths of Will's subconscious to accompany him on his journey.

Will slowly turned on his heels, feeling reassured, encouraged by the presence he had not seen since he had lost consciousness in Baltimore.

With the beam of his flashlight illuminating his way, Will climbed down a set of stairs, steps slick with moss and algae, to a room that must have been the wine cellar to the estate, perhaps a pantry with dried meat, freshly caught game waiting to be prepared.

When Will shone his light around the room, however, it was not only the shelves full of dusty wine bottles he found waiting for him.

Chapter 8

At the end of the long, rectangular room he found yet another iron gate, this one built heavier and narrower; too keep someone in, rather than out.

As Will approached the small dungeon the light of his torch reflected back to him in the eyes of a man staring at him through the grate.

Illuminating more of his body, he found that the man was haggard, hair and beard long and wild as they hid most of his face from view. He was almost entirely naked, exposed to the elements, the rain water steadily dripping down to his cell, the cold winds finding their way down to him with ease.

Yet, to Will's surprise, the man who resembled a skeleton rather than a human being, was still alive.

When the man looked beyond the blinding, artificial light, realising that it was not his captor who had come to visit, his eyes widened, limbs desperately fast as he grasped the metal grate. His voice was hoarse and almost silent, the sounds of a man who had given up on calling for help and begging for mercy many years ago.

"I cannot understand you," Will replied calmly and slowly, keeping a safe distance from the prisoner, aware of the way his eyes quickly darted over his body, looking for something to grab or hold onto.

To Will's surprise, the man's language changed to English as soon as he realised that Will was a foreigner, a thick accent wrapped around his every word.

"You need to help me…! Let me out…!"

Will knelt down by the door, a key nowhere to be found.

His face remained calm and neutral, still trying to make sense of the situation he had walked in on.

As strongly as Will felt the urge to help and save, something about this man made his gut twist, his deepest instincts trying to alert him, to warn him of the danger his rational mind had not yet caught up to.

"The man-... the man who put me here-... He is a monster-!"

The man coughed and spat, just trying to make Will understand him seemed to take all of the strength that remained within him.

"Please-...! I know-... know you are not like him-...!"

Will's expression darkened, eyes growing distant as he looked at the man opposite him.

There was no doubt he was Hannibal's prisoner. And knowing Hannibal, Will doubted this act was one of mere amusement.

A man captured and locked away in the deepest, darkest cellar of Hannibal's home…

This was no tableaux. No execution for the sake of satisfying Hannibal's urge to kill.

This was far more personal. Far too emotional for Hannibal's standards.

"How long have you been here for?" Will replied quietly, observing the man opposite him closely.

"I don't know-..." The man broke out into a wailing noise, a sound somewhere between the high-pitched laughter of despair and a guttural sob. "I don't know-... All those days-... they became years, and I could not count them anymore-..."

Will doubted that Hannibal had had many opportunities to return to this place after he had left his childhood home and the trauma he had experienced, much less so after leaving Europe and building a life and career for himself in the United States. The years the man spoke of were likely closer to decades.

Someone other than Hannibal had kept him alive, then, yet had not shown him the mercy of either freeing or killing him. Had kept him prisoner, fed him just enough to survive, prolonging his torturous existence.

Even though Will knew very little of Hannibal's early life, there would only be few possibilities he could imagine which would warrant such a miserable life and death in Hannibal's books.

"Tell me why you are here," Will explained calmly, looking right into the wild man's eyes, "Tell me the truth. And I will set you free."

The man gasped for air, began sobbing breathlessly, uncontrollably, crying for himself rather than the fates he had shaped, the lives he had irrevocably destroyed.

"We had no choice-... We-... We would have died-...! And she would have died, anyway-...!"

The knot in Will's gut turned into the heavy, all consuming hot sensation of rage, a fury so vengeful and destructive it ached and burned underneath his skin, seeking an outlet, a target to focus on.

"Whom did you kill?"

Will did not ask for an answer.

He asked for confirmation.

That small, tiny piece of knowledge, the information that would complete the puzzle.

"L-Lecter-.... Mischa Lecter-..."

The man cried only harder, hands reaching for Will through the grates, yearning for a freedom that he had only dreamt of ever since he could remember, his past life before his imprisonment a beautiful fantasy long lost to time.

“Please-... There was nothing we could do-... I don’t deserve to die like this-...!”

“You’re right…” Will replied calmly, standing back up again.

He took a moment to look around for something he could use as leverage against the heavy lock keeping the door in place.

The loud metallic crack echoed from the narrow walls around them as Will broke the padlock, the door screeching and aching under its own weight as he pulled it open.

The man could not help but stare at Will incredulously, crawling out of his prison, tasting freedom for the first time in what felt like a lifetime.

“And you were right about me, too, you know.”

Will’s voice was soft and smooth, quietly following the man around the room as he scoured the cellar for food and drinks, anything consumable at all to quench his thirst and satisfy the never-ending hunger he had experienced.

“I am not like the man who has kept you here…”

The man laughed his dry, silent laugh, gulping down an ancient vintage of wine.

“I can see that…!”

Will approached him with a smile, the jackknife he had kept in the pocket of his pants unfolding silently in his hand.

With a swift, forceful motion Will thrusted the blade into the man’s neck, spraying blood all over the cellar as he removed it just as suddenly, leaving him to bleed out so quickly Will barely had time to savour the look of shock and pure horror on the man’s face.

As he lay on the floor, twitching and gurgling, eyes wide as whatever colour was left in him drained from his face, Will knelt over him, knees on his arms, making sure he would not dare to try and break one of the bottles to deal him an injury in return.

He leaned in closer, the smell of hot, iron blood mixing with the mouldy scent of the cellar around them.

“I am not like Hannibal Lecter… As you can see, my patience for revenge and punishment has a far shorter half life…”

When Will had cleaned his knife and put it back into place, it was not the overwhelming smell of rot and blood all around him that he found hardest to deal with.

It was the complete and utter absence of guilt.

Will Graham stood over a stranger, a man he had just killed, a victim of his own crime, yet all he felt was calm. He felt entirely in control of himself. And he felt righteous.

Will took a deep breath, trying not to allow his thoughts to spiral, to not allow himself to overthink what he had done, and to preserve the peace and satisfaction he felt.

It was unbearably difficult to allow even the outskirts of the thought that tugged at his conscience, yet deep down Will knew that he was fine with this.

He would be able to go on with his life. He would sleep at night, and not waste his thoughts agonising over a man who did not deserve his mercy. Not a man who had killed and cannibalised an innocent little girl, and did not even show remorse in the moments before his death.

Will took a look around the room, and there was no question for him of what to do next. It came naturally to him, like the inspiration that guides the hand of an artist.

Will grabbed one of the empty bottles he found, and smashing it into pieces he would follow his design.

When Will had finished his work he stood there, taking in the image of the man, transformed into a firefly.

He watched the lightning bugs curiously circle his creation, and he could not have wished for a more perfect tableaux as their bodies reflected off of the wings of the firefly man, shards of glass sparkling and glowing in the darkness.

As satisfied as Will felt with his creation, a sense of loss overcame him all the same.

It disappointed him deeply to think that Hannibal would never see this design of his. He would never stand beside him in this dark cellar that smelled of wine, blood and the damp scent of rainwater, marvelling at the spectacle that Will had created, and that nature enhanced.

Back when Will had still been looking for the Chesapeake Ripper, he had witnessed many of Hannibal's tableaus, some of them first-hand. It felt imbalanced, unfair even, that a design of Will's he felt so strongly about would be the one that Hannibal would never get to witness.

With one last, final look, observing as many details as he could, Will held onto an item in his pocket a little bit tighter, resting next to his knife.

A bracelet, small enough to fit the wrist of a child, engraved with the name of Mischa Lecter.

Will had found it hidden in the tiny cell space the man had occupied; a trophy, a memento of the life he had so cruelly taken, hidden behind a loose brick in the wall to keep him company.

A sole pleasure in a lifetime of imprisonment without remorse.

Finally Will averted his eyes, grabbed his belongings and turned his back on the ghost that had haunted Hannibal and his home.

Outside the fog had turned into a steady drizzle of rain, and dawn was nearly on the horizon when Will reached his rental Jeep once more, wet and cold and dirty.

He was sure whoever guarded the grounds, whoever had been the keeper of Hannibal's prisoner, had watched him leave, carefully stalked him across the grounds to make sure he left.

Will hoped that whatever curse, whatever misery and tragedy had befallen the Lecter estate, his visit had contributed a small relief to it. He was one more person to shoulder the burden, and he would take with him a ghost of the past in return.

Chapter 9

The train had just passed the border, the Italian landscape once again coming into view as Will raised his cup of breakfast coffee to his lips. The food in the small dining car was not particularly good nor bad, yet Will could not help but feel elated.

Returning to Italy felt just as reassuring to him now as returning to Wolf Trap always had. He looked forward to the familiar streets of Florence, the scents and change in weather. The Mediterranean sun that would chase away the darkness he had just witnessed in Lithuania, and that had lingered in his mind on the way home.

Void of books to keep himself entertained with Will lazily pulled over a free copy of the morning paper he had been provided with at the table, keeping himself busy until it was time for him to switch trains.

As much as he looked forward to his home in Florence, there was still one last place Will needed to visit before he could return to see Hannibal.

If the castle-like mansion in Lithuania had been the home and beginning of Hannibal Lecter as a man, then the Cappella Palatina in the Norman Palace in Palermo was the home and beginning of his mind.

Will took another sip of coffee and wondered how he would feel, standing in the halls that he had only ever visited figuratively. He wondered if he would feel ready to return to Florence, to face Hannibal again with a better understanding of him, or if Will had merely fooled himself into believing that these worldly places would make him feel any closer to Hannibal, like a devout believer hoping to feel closer to God in the sacred halls of his churches.

—-

Will's footsteps echoed softly on the smooth floor as he stepped into the chapel, taller, even more breathtaking than the pictures he had seen.

For a while Will's gaze lingered on the ceiling, the intricate paintings of the ceiling frescoes that throned above him, saints as close to God as any believer could ever hope to be.

Quietly Will walked around, taking his time to observe all the details, the impressive architecture and art around him.

He tried to see the chapel with Hannibal's eyes, see what he saw, feel what he must have felt as he had encountered this exceptionally beautiful chapel for the first time.

Will hesitated, feeling like a stranger, an intruder to the religious rituals he encountered, then lit one of the small candles by the wall. There was no prayer on his mind, no gravesite to mourn at. There were only the sights and sounds his imagination had allowed him to perceive, and to carry with him from Lithuania all the way to Sicily. Mischa Lecter, happy and carefree, safe under the watchful eyes of her brother.

It took Will a long moment to pull himself away from the small, flickering light in front of him, circling back around the room.

Just like Hannibal had once told him, standing by the fireplace in his office, Will, too, found the skeleton that was engraved in the floor. The centrepiece at the front of the altar, from which Will had an even greater view of the frescoes above him.

Here Will felt close to Hannibal rather than to God, following his footsteps, walking in the shadows of his past.

Time passed as Will stood there, absorbing the smells and noises, the feelings the room evoked in him, and the way it comforted him to feel Hannibal's presence as closely as he had by the lake on the Lecter estate.

With one last, final look Will turned his back on the religious icons and exited the chapel as quietly as he had entered it.

Tomorrow, he would light another candle for Mischa before he left for Florence. Before he would finally feel ready to face Hannibal again.

—

When Will set foot into the chapel the next day, his previous feelings of comfort and familiarity could not have been further from what he was experiencing now.

The unmistakable smell of decay, of iron blood and sweet decomposition lingered in the room, reaching him already as he rounded the corner to enter the chapel, meat and bones hidden beyond the visual covers of the police.

Will approached slowly until one of the police officers stopped him, arguing with his superior in quick Italian before a third man interrupted them, walking over to Will.

"Signor Graham," the man greeted him, his voice calm but his eyes alert, fixating on Will like a bloodhound who had caught a scent in the air.

"Have we met?" Will replied simply, the short, greying hair and beard of the man unfamiliar to him, yet there was an expression of recognition in his opponent.

"Chief Investigator Rinaldo Pazzi, Questura di Firenze," the man finally introduced himself.

“You’re a long way from Florence…”

“And you are a long way from Baltimore, Signor Graham,” Pazzi smiled at him, yet the smile did not fully reach his eyes.

“I don’t recall meeting you there before.”

“You have not,” Pazzi countered, carefully dissecting every little piece of information Will might offer. “You and I, we share a gift. Imagination. I am very familiar with the methods of the FBI.”

Pazzi slowly circled Will like a shark, greatly interested in the younger man.

“Last anybody ever heard of you, you entered the house of the cannibal Hannibal Lecter. You encountered the Chesapeake Ripper. You were believed to be dead... Yet here you are. You had simply disappeared.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Will replied shortly, eyebrows raised.

Pazzi gave a short, amused chuckle.

“Your secret is safe with me, Signor Graham… If you would be so kind as to lend me your imagination. Let me see if you have reached the same conclusion that I did.”

Pazzi gestured towards the screens shielding the crime scene from view, and led the way for Will, passing a number of sceptical and observant police officers.

“What do you see, Signor Graham?”

When Will came into full view of the crime scene he felt punched in the chest, a tableaux so overwhelmingly created in Hannibal’s style, a symbol so powerful and unmistakable it left Will speechless for a moment.

Keeping his composure in front of Pazzi as best he could, Will slowly circled the corpse, broken and bent into the form of a human heart, impaled by three swords and situated right above the skeleton Will had stood by not 24 hours earlier.

Associations came quickly for Will, as did the forts he pulled up around him on the outside, not allowing Pazzi to see what feelings the crime scene truly evoked for Will.

The Three of Swords.

Betrayal. Heartache. Sadness. Hurting.

Will’s gaze wandered down to the swords, impaling the heart from down below, rather than being driven through them from above.

A card reversed.

A heartache somehow mitigated by its circumstances. A hurtful fate, yet not as terrible as it could have been.

Will closed his eyes, taking a deep breath, before he felt Pazzi stepping closer to him.

“What do you think, Signor Graham?”

Will looked back at the human heart.

“A Valentine written on a broken man.”

Pazzi nodded slowly, seemingly satisfied with his answer.

“A message, for sure. As artistic as the art of the chapel all around it. Yet the questions remain, who it is for… and if that person will respond in the same way.”

Will closed his eyes again, seemingly unwell.

The thought of all these people around, intruding on a scene that was only for Will to see both hurt and agitated him.

“What makes you think the addressee has not become the message themselves?”

Pazzi contemplated his thought, nodding calmly.

“Thank you, Signor Graham.”

He looked over to his colleagues, the impatient and curious eyes that followed them around the room.

“My colleagues still have a few questions for you. They may need your statement.”

“As a visitor of this church or as Will Graham?”

Pazzi pondered his options for a moment, then gave Will a small nod and a smile.

“I am aware that in your circumstances, having your current location known and your name on record is not an option for you. Just tell me what you were doing here today, Signor Graham.”

Will looked at him calmly, trying not to grit his teeth through his answer, anxious to get out of this situation, to find Hannibal.

“I wanted to pray. And to light a candle.”

Pazzi took a long, uncomfortable moment before he nodded, turning away from Will.

“I will handle the rest, Signor Graham. Thank you for your… perspective.”

Will nodded quietly and rounded the corner, leaving Pazzi behind the screens, the attention of his colleagues now turned to him, corresponding quickly and quietly.

As Will stepped back into the open room, cleared of the chairs that had stood there during mass, he found that some of the policemen had left their positions on the outside of the screens, having moved on to other duties around the chapel.

For a moment, he was out of sight from the police, unobserved.

Will looked to the grated windows above, windows he had not noticed on his visit the day prior, and he could not help but think of what an excellent point of observation they provided, especially of the spot right at the centre of the altar.

Will took a look around, still finding himself alone among the hustle and bustle of the crime scene, and his gaze finally rested upon the large doors below, leading into the catacombs, the crypt of the palace.

If this chapel was the entrance to Hannibal's memory palace, there had to be a connection to the other rooms.

If Hannibal had placed this broken heart for Will to find, he would surely still be nearby to see his reaction.

None of the policemen noticed that Will had not left the chapel yet, the stairs leading below hidden from their view as Will quietly closed the heavy doors behind himself.

Down here it was colder, a familiar scent of damp stone and bones in the air, fabrics and cloths decaying around the skeletons left to rest and guard one another.

Small flames led his way as Will stepped deeper into the crypt, the countless archways and passages quietly throwing back the echoes of his steps to him.

Will felt his heart beat heavier in his chest with every step he took deeper into the maze, expectant, yet anxious all the same.

Then, almost by chance, Will caught a faint whiff of another scent down here, among the peaceful quiet of the dead.

Lavender and sandalwood.

"Hannibal…?"

Will's voice was quieter than he had anticipated, his mind torn between the need, the urge to finally see Hannibal again, to be near him and part of his world, where the other half was full of doubts, hesitations and fear.

Will felt dizzy, almost stuck in his ways, just like the night he had not known himself well enough to anticipate his own decision as he had picked up the phone and called Hannibal.

Just like back then, Will was sure he would know what to do, let his truest self decide when he would hear Hannibal's voice.

Will stepped further into the maze, trying to follow the scent before it faded away, trying to catch up with the man who had always been one step ahead of him, every step of their way.

“Hannibal…!”

Will stopped, the scent stronger now, not fading away anymore as he remained in place, his heartbeat thudding in his ears, drowning out every last one of his doubts.

He closed his eyes, knowing Hannibal had to be nearby, remaining in place to listen to him.

Will's lips parted gently as he exhaled slowly, preparing himself for the words he had never known he felt the urge to say out loud so badly.

“I forgive you…”

Will closed his eyes, trying to ignore the hot, burning sensation in them, the tears that pooled ever so slightly around his lashes.

“And I don’t know how I can make things right again… I know I hurt you, too… but-...”

Will laughed, silent and hopeless, desperate to find the connection again he had always had with Hannibal.

"I am sorry… I wish I had left with you when you asked me to…"

He thought of their past, their present. Of Hannibal’s past and his own.

For the first time, he thought about their future.

“I… I have never known myself as well as I know myself… when I am with you-…”

Will kept his eyes closed, hands curling into fists as he tried to keep them from shaking as he felt the scent getting stronger, and heard the footsteps approaching behind him.

Will clenched his jaw tightly to keep himself from crying as he felt Hannibal’s presence behind him, his arms closing around Will, embracing him in a way that made Will feel like Hannibal would never let him go again.

Hannibal buried his face at the crook of Will’s neck, sending shivers down his spine as he felt his hot breath against his skin, his lips so close to the most vulnerable part of his body as an unmated omega, yet keeping their distance, not crossing that final line.

Finally, it was Hannibal who broke the silence, one hand gently resting on Will’s abdomen as if to mend the wounds he had dealt him, mending where he had hurt him, broken every last layer of his protection, and his voice was all Will needed to hear to know he had made the right decision, however that would come to take shape in the future.

“Let’s go home, Will…”

Chapter 10

Will was grateful that Hannibal had not brought up the option to rearrange their separate bookings on the night train back to Florence. It had given them both a little more time and space to process everything that they had experienced in those past few days, before they would return to their shared space in the city they had come to call their home.

Hannibal would arrive later than Will at their apartment, getting some fresh grocery items from the market first. When Will had unpacked his travel bag and settled in once more, there was nothing left for him to do but wait.

The minutes ticked by and felt like hours, stretching beyond what Will thought he could take.

In the crypt below the Cappella Palatina he had felt so sure of himself. Now, it was the anxiety, the fear of the unknown that lay before him that returned to his body.

He was slowly pacing the living room, hands buried in the pockets of his pants so he wouldn't fidget with them. Old habits that were dying slowly, even after all these years of trying to adapt to a nervous system that processed impressions way more quickly than Will would have liked.

Finally, he heard the gentle click of the lock, his heart beating in his throat as he saw Hannibal again.

"Let me get those."

He joined him by their coat rack, taking the groceries Hannibal had brought with him.

"I made some coffee. Would you like some?"

"Yes, please."

Will nodded and headed back to the kitchen, replenishing their fridge and pantry with the items Hannibal had bought.

As he carried back two cups of coffee with him to the living room, Hannibal had just returned from his bedroom.

"Thank you, Will."

Hannibal took the cup Will offered with a gentle smile and sat down on the sofa, taking a sip of the freshly brewed drink.

Will held onto his own cup a little tighter, still standing next to Hannibal.

"Is everything okay, Will? You seem nervous."

Will smiled slightly, staring down at his cup.

“I feel… anxious. It feels like something…” He took a deep breath, daring to meet Hannibal’s eyes, even though it cost him more strength than he would have liked to admit. “Something should have changed between us… I feel like I don’t know how to act around you right now.”

Hannibal smiled calmly.

“I admit, we do find ourselves in an unusual position. Perhaps what you are experiencing, and what is causing you to feel so anxious, is a sense of… vulnerability.”

“I feel like it’s not something we’ve excelled at in the past… being vulnerable with each other.”

Hannibal chuckled as he took another sip of coffee, and just the sight of his reaction alone made Will smile involuntarily.

“Certainly not…”

Will took a deep breath, weight shifting from one foot to the other.

“So… where do we go from here?”

“Where would you like to start?”

A question so simple, yet so difficult at once.

Will finally sat down on the sofa, taking a moment to contemplate his answer, sorting his thoughts.

Perhaps, it was best to work from where they had left off.

“In the chapel… Who was he? Did you know him?”

“Yes,” Hannibal replied calmly, “And so did you.”

Given how very few contacts Will had built during his months in Italy, there was only one option that quickly came to mind.

“That… that TA of Dr. Fell’s? The one we had for dinner?”

Hannibal made a face, eyebrows briefly raised.

“Well, not quite.”

Will could not tell if Hannibal being comfortable enough around him to make these kinds of jokes was something to despair over or be morbidly amused by.

He bit back a smile that quickly turned into an expression of worry.

“Did you take anything from him?”

“No,” Hannibal replied just as calmly, yet almost regretful. “I figured the display alone would be a very exceptional one among the local crime statistics. Given the modus operandi of the Chesapeake Ripper that was rather recently exposed to the public, I decided to take the precaution of not keeping any trophies for my personal pleasure.”

“For now,” Will added quietly, almost questioningly.

“For now,” Hannibal agreed, setting aside his empty cup on the coffee table.

A comfortable silence prevailed between them for a while, before Will would raise his voice again.

He enjoyed having conversations with Hannibal. Not fights or arguments, not skirting the outlines of topics they would rather avoid. He looked at Hannibal for a while, and he took the time to appreciate all the little details that usually evaded his capture. Less so his scent, calming and reassuring, belonging to this home just as much as Will’s did.

“I know you did not expect a rut cycle so soon… Did you spend it well? Safely?”

Hannibal met his eyes, and a slightly mischievous and curious expression lay in his own.

“Thank you, I did.”

“Sparing me the details?” Will chuckled.

“You’ve already seen them in the Norman Palace.”

Will seemed confused, yet Hannibal’s expression stayed the same. Calm, attentive, and entirely focused on Will.

“I have left you a broken heart for the world to see, Will. What makes you think I would spend the days of my rut going out and satisfying any sort of intimate or sexual needs with anybody else, merely because I possess the biological means to do so?”

Will swallowed dryly and his head began to swim, heart beating faster in his chest once more.

Hannibal noticed the spike in his scent, but did not comment on it. He left Will the choice of how to proceed this conversation instead.

“Are you-…?"

Will felt like fainting as he looked at Hannibal, finally forcing himself to confront himself with the question he felt he had always known the answer to, yet had never felt ready to hear, his voice slow and steady as if to eradicate even the smallest possibility of room for error.

“Hannibal… Are you *in love* with me…?”

Looking into his eyes, Will finally saw the raw emotions Hannibal had kept him from seeing in the crypt, the reality of how deeply he touched his soul, never allowing himself to stray too far from the path of Will Graham against all reason and odds.

“Yes.”

Hannibal moved quickly, extending a hand to catch the cup that slipped from Will’s fingers, avoiding more shards and broken cups, the inevitable potential of damage they both carried.

“I’m sorry-...”

Will’s voice was barely a whisper, and both of them knew his apology did not concern itself with the stains of spilled coffee on the carpet below.

“Don’t be,” Hannibal replied calmly, far more composed than Will thought he could himself have been in his position.

Will saw an overwhelming expression of honesty and genuine affection in his eyes as Hannibal looked at him again.

“There is nothing for you to be sorry about, Will. I understand that we have not always been on the same page, yet I do believe we share a story within the same book. I will wait until you are ready to say whatever it is you need to say to me in return.”

Will had not felt the tears until they spilled onto his cheeks, hot and wet against his skin.

“Thank you-...”

It was barely a whisper, yet Hannibal understood him nonetheless.

Will felt frozen in time, angry with himself for how stupidly incapable he felt of understanding or even nearly verbalising his own feelings.

He *knew*. He had always known, in a way.

What made it so hard for him to say it, then?

“I have something for you…” Will finally heard himself say, and the gravity that accompanied his words made Hannibal equally concerned and curious.

Will got up and went over to his room, Hannibal following him quietly.

“I wanted to give this to you, I just… I didn’t know when would be a good time…”

Will grabbed something from the drawer of his night table, and with his fist protectively closed around the small object, he turned back around to Hannibal.

Carefully, as if he feared that Hannibal might shy away from his touch, Will took Hannibal’s hand with his other one, turning it so that his palm faced upwards.

Gently Will placed the small item in Hannibal’s hand, closing his fingers around it for a moment before he allowed him to finally see, not only feel what Hannibal had believed to be forever lost to time, theft or negligence.

Will would not have needed the indicators of sadness and distress in Hannibal's scent to read his reaction as he looked down upon the bracelet that had once adorned the wrist of his little sister, polished and restored to the best of Will's abilities.

Hannibal's voice sounded calm, yet tight and breathy, beneath the surface of his self-control hidden all the emotions he had rarely ever allowed another person to see, like a deadly current beneath quiet waters.

"There were only two people whom I have ever loved unconditionally in my life. It seems fitting that I would encounter both of you on the same day, together."

"God, Hannibal, *don't-*" Will shook his head helplessly, feeling entirely overwhelmed and paralysed with overstimulation, before he gave in to the impulse to pull Hannibal into a hug so tight the other man did not dare to break away from him, allowing himself to be comforted in his grief for the first time in decades.

Will held Hannibal for a long time, not allowing him to break away, not allowing them to drift apart on the open waves of his emotions.

Hannibal's shoulders shook slightly with silent sobs, the hands that held onto Will both holding onto him tightly and trembling with the overwhelming sadness in need of an outlet.

Will gently placed one of his hands at the back of Hannibal's head, running his fingers through his hair, pulling him closer into his embrace, towards the crook of his neck, hoping that whatever of his scent was left underneath the thick padding of suppressants would be soothing to him.

Will closed his eyes and kept quietly caressing Hannibal, finding himself by the stream of his own memory palace to keep himself calm and collected, enough to not let his empathy overwhelm him to the point where he would not be able to withstand the intensity of Hannibal's feelings anymore.

Eventually, Will felt the tremble and shivers of Hannibal's body steadily subside, his feelings of guilt, grief and heartbreak leaving him exhausted and tearless.

"You should get some rest…" Will finally broke the silence, quietly and carefully, his hand slowly and soothingly wandering over Hannibal's back.

Hannibal was the first to pull back, out of Will's protective embrace, avoiding his eyes.

He nodded quietly, unsure of what his voice might sound like if he dared to speak now.

Will gently sat him down at the edge of the bed, trying not to let on how much it hurt him to see Hannibal in so much distress, not knowing that Hannibal could smell every nuance of his scent just as clearly, the effects of the suppressants barely noticeable to him.

Will went to pull the curtains closed, switching on the small, warm light of his bedside lamp instead. Comfort in darkness. If it had worked for Will countless times in the past, he hoped it might do the same for Hannibal now.

Hannibal followed his unspoken invitation and laid down on Will's bed, his senses immediately sensitive to the scent of the omega all around him.

Hannibal had always felt it was quite fitting that Will had chosen a stream as his main focus point of his memory palace, given how well it complimented his scent. Pine trees, fresh, damp earth after warm summer rain, and the restless flow of a small freshwater brook. Sometimes he wondered if Will had taken suppressants for so many years that these nuances had become entirely lost to him by now.

"I'll be next door if you need me…"

The image disappeared as Hannibal opened his eyes again, finally meeting Will's eyes once more.

"Stay."

His voice was unusually quiet, almost fragile, yet with a determination and gentle firmness that prevented Will from questioning his request.

Will quietly closed the door once more, shutting out the outside world as he laid down opposite Hannibal in his bed, treading carefully, yet feeling a deep feeling of pride and gratitude that Hannibal would have him close by in such a vulnerable moment.

A moment of weakness with no false pride, no masks, no expectations and pretences.

Will carefully laid his hand upon Hannibal's, the other man's fingers still holding onto the last physical memento of his little sister.

Hannibal let him.

Chapter 11

When Hannibal awoke he had lost all sense of time and direction. His eyes felt tired and his body heavy with a type of exhaustion he had not experienced in ages. He took a deep, calm breath, and the familiar smells around him immediately helped bring him back to the present.

The bed next to him was empty.

In Will's stead, he now found an item sitting on the night table, illuminated by the warm light of the lamp, that had definitely not been there before.

Hannibal's right hand ached as he sat up, fingers stiff and cold from clutching Mischa's bracelet in his sleep. Carefully he set the precious item down and grabbed the small, rectangular object Will had left for him instead.

With a sharp, metallic snap the blade of the jackknife extended before him, cleaned and polished, glistening dangerously in the orange light of the bedroom, casting ominous shadows in its wake.

Hannibal contemplated the knife for a moment, observing it closely as he turned it in his hand.

Then he folded the blade back home and laid the knife beside Mischa's bracelet onto the night stand.

As Hannibal exited Will's bedroom, night had fallen over Florence, the fire of their fireplace crackling quietly, bringing comfort to their space.

He found the dinner table laid for two, set already with a few appetisers Hannibal did not recollect buying, and the smell of freshly cooked dinner wafted over to him from the kitchen.

"You're awake."

Will smiled at him, lowering the whiskey glass he had just taken a sip from.

"Sit down. I'll be just a minute."

Hannibal nodded, watching Will for another moment as he didn't seem to notice, before he took his place at the dinner table.

Will appeared a moment later with a dish that Hannibal found was quite a decent lasagna.

"Thank you for taking care of dinner," Hannibal smiled, feeling more sure of himself once again, taking his cutlery in hand, "And for taking care of me."

Will smiled in a way that Hannibal could only think of as shy.

"Of course…"

They ate in comfortable silence, and only over drinks did Hannibal raise the topic that had been on his mind ever since Will had returned Mischa's bracelet to him.

"Where did you find it?"

Will immediately caught on, taking another sip of his whiskey before he spoke.

"It was hidden in the cell. Behind a few loose bricks…"

"I didn't think he would give it up willingly."

"He didn't."

Hannibal smiled calmly.

"The knife?"

Will nodded.

"I…"

Will's gaze became distant, far away, looking back into the darkness he had encountered at the Lecter estate. A small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"I wish you could have seen him, Hannibal. The way the lightning bugs glowed and shimmered in the glass shards of his wings…"

Hannibal's heart was full of hatred for the man he had locked away from the world when he had been just a young man, yet he felt just as much pride and affection for the man who now sat opposite him, having put an end to the physical remains of the nightmare that had haunted Hannibal for decades.

"I was not the only one, then, who spent our days apart to create something… meaningful."

Will smiled slightly, a bit more insecure now.

"I would hope so. I didn't mean to take the opportunity to kill him away from you… I just…" Will shook his head slightly, watching the swaying of the amber liquid as he slowly swirled his glass, "I couldn't help myself. Not after he still seemed so…"

"Unrepentant," Hannibal completed his sentence calmly, yet feeling the old emotions of rage and vengefulness gripping his heart like a hand made of ice.

Will nodded.

"I know it was not my place to interfere in the fate you had chosen for him…"

"I am glad you did," Hannibal replied honestly. "I wouldn't have him die by any other hand but yours."

Will felt a hint of insecurity at the value Hannibal placed upon his actions, yet the talk they had had in the earlier evening served just as well to both soothe him and make him anxious once more.

Hannibal trusted Will making the final decision, determining the fate of the man who had killed his sister; and he did so, because he loved him.

“While I was there…” Will began, voice cracking slightly as he tried to avoid overthinking both Hannibal’s emotions and his own, “I felt… watched, somehow. Like I wasn’t alone there.”

Hannibal smiled, chuckled even, then took another sip of his wine.

“I suppose that would have been Chiyoh. I am certain she would have had no qualms at all at stopping you at any point, had she deemed your presence there too disruptive.”

“Chiyoh? A friend of yours?”

“A very old friend, indeed… She was the maid of my aunt Murasaki. The wife of my uncle Robertus, who had adopted me after I became an orphan.”

“I remember you mentioning him,” Will nodded softly, memories going far back to the early days of their relationship, discussing family ties in Hannibal’s office.

Other memories returned to him.

Those of burning papers, magnificent halls echoing the images of saints. The dark, dreaded halls and corridors of a memory palace Hannibal did not dare tread.

"We don't have to talk about them," Will said softly, trying to offer the same care and safety Hannibal had given him when Will had shut down during one of their sessions, refusing to elaborate further upon the circumstances of his own upbringing. "I appreciate you sharing these details with me. And as much as I would want to know so much more about you… as much as I want to understand you, I don't want you to feel like you have to talk to me about things you rather didn't."

Other words of reassurance came to Will’s mind, yet their implications did not make it past his lips, materialising in the space between them.

I don't want you to feel like I am abusing your trust and feelings for me to gain sensitive information about you that could harm you.

"I appreciate it, Will," Hannibal replied calmly, his gaze focused on the deep red wine in his glass. "I truly do. Perhaps another night."

He looked at Will again, and his expression was calm and gentle.

"I can feel the urge to share more about myself with you, as much as I feel the familiar instinct to draw away. I hope you won't take this personally."

"God, no," Will replied immediately, emptying his own glass of whiskey. "It's been a long night. And I kind of sprang all of this on you, so… In your own time."

Hannibal looked at his wine again, and his gaze became as distant as Will's had been thinking back to the Lecter estate. Hannibal smiled.

"I would like to tell you about her… About Mischa."

Will mirrored his smile, and he could see the children playing by the lake out of the corner of his eyes as Hannibal allowed them to return to their field of vision.

"I'd like that."

—

Will woke with a start that night, sitting up too quickly, instantly feeling dizzy and nauseous.

He needed to adjust for a moment, check his usual symptoms, yet none of them were there. There was no intense heat, no sweat covering his body, his heart only pounding in his chest because he had startled himself so much.

After another moment of silence, Will knew what had ripped him out of his dreams.

A scream, so full of pain and agony, reaching him from the distant second bedroom of their apartment.

Will freed himself of the sheets he had tangled himself in and jumped out of bed, his eyes picking up on the sparse light as he quickly navigated around the furniture.

"Hannibal?"

Will knocked softly at his door but didn't wait for an answer that would not come, stepping inside the pitch black bedroom.

"Hannibal?" Will repeated, finally finding the edge of Hannibal’s bed, turning on the adjustable light of the lamp just enough to see him better.

Hannibal's face was contorted with the pain he experienced, the haunting of his nightmare he couldn't escape.

"Hannibal," Will said a little louder, gently laying a hand upon his face.

With the unfamiliar touch intruding upon the memories of his dreams Hannibal finally opened his eyes, chest rising and falling quickly with shallow breaths.

His eyes were wild and confused as he looked up at Will, cold sweat glistening on his skin in the faint light.

"Hannibal?" Will asked softly, trying to meet his gaze as Hannibal tried to orient himself. "Do you know where you are?"

Hannibal looked around his room, yet every shadow, every shape hidden in the darkness lured him back into his memories, trapping him, making him lose his footing in the desolate hallways of the most forsaken corners of his memory palace. Blurring his vision, taking over his reality, spreading slowly and menacingly like the slick of an oil spill.

"Your name is Hannibal Lecter."

Hannibal felt the hand on his cheek, competing with the false reality of his trauma that grew before him.

"It is 3:17 AM."

Fingers were gently running through his hair, and a waft of the smell of pine trees now competed with the darkness within him, a darkness of blood, decay and flesh, of copper bathtubs and tiny bones.

"You are in Florence, Italy."

Hannibal heard the gentle gurgle of water, perceived a smell of earth, rain, and warm, comforting sunlight. Before him, the shadows slowly retreated from his vision, back into the hallways deeply buried in his mind, giving way to the familiar and safe shapes of his bedroom.

"You're safe."

Hannibal finally managed to look up at Will, nodding weakly as he closed his eyes, catching his breath.

"How did you know-...?"

"I heard you," Will replied softly, gently pushing a few unruly strands of hair out of the other man's face. "You were screaming in your sleep…"

Hannibal sat up straight, taking a deep breath.

"I haven't had a dream this bad since I was a teenager…" He sighed, rubbing his face. "I apologise, Will. I didn't mean to wake you…"

"*You're* sorry?" Will looked at him incredulously, his eyes mirroring the guilt in his voice. "You have nothing to apologise for… I'm the one who dug up all your memories again… It's my fault for exploring your past so carelessly…"

"Do *not* apologise to me about that, Will."

Hannibal's voice was rough, and slightly harsher than Will was used to from him.

"You had no part in what happened to me when I was a child. If anything, you are one of the few people I feel comfortable enough sharing my past with."

Hannibal turned his head and Will followed his gaze, down to the small bracelet that rested on his bedside table.

"It felt good, telling you about her. I chose to share these details with you, even if it meant engaging with painful memories..."

Will nodded quietly, not wanting to upset Hannibal even further by arguing about the matter. There was no doubt in his mind that he had been the one to trigger these memories, especially the ugly ones with his talk of the prisoner he had killed.

"I'll get you some water…"

Will quietly left the bedroom, allowing himself to process these feelings for a moment, both his and Hannibal’s.

When he returned he offered the glass to Hannibal who drank half of it before he got distracted by the other item Will had gotten.

Will slowly extended his hand, carefully pressing the cool, damp washcloth against Hannibal's temple and cheek.

Hannibal closed his eyes and wrapped one of his hands around Will's wrist, gently holding onto him as he carefully eased the heat of terror under Hannibal’s skin at his face and neck.

Will felt a subtle sensation of chills all over his body as he felt Hannibal’s pulse so close to his hand, the hand that held onto him a little tighter, more intentionally, the subtle spike in Hannibal’s scent as he looked right at him.

Will met his gaze, but the intensity he felt made him stumble for a moment before he found his words again.

"Do you need anything?"

Hannibal pulled Will's arm a little higher, and placed a gentle, brief kiss to the back of Will's fingers.

"If I asked you to stay… would you?"

Despite how out of his depths he still felt in regards to his own feelings about Hannibal, Will didn't need time to think about his answer.

"Always."

Just like they had done that afternoon, Will laid down beside Hannibal, and even without a bracelet to guard and protect, Will held onto Hannibal’s hand as they fell asleep.

Chapter 12

Light fell through the high windows of the foyer, warm sunshine illuminating the paintings that adorned the walls and ceiling.

Hannibal stepped into the foyer of his mind palace, his large, adult hand gently holding onto the hand of his baby sister who would forever remain 4 years old.

There was no rush to their steps, and Hannibal smiled as Mischa took her time looking around, in awe of the spacious and bright part of his palace she had never seen before.

When Hannibal approached the altar with her, however, she suddenly let go of his grip, easing his immediate concern as she laughed happily as she ran down the aisle.

Mischa squealed happily as she reached the skeleton, and the man standing above it who welcomed her with open arms, lifting her up into a hug as she threw her arms around his shoulders.

Will smiled at Hannibal as he met his gaze, the expression on his face as gentle and reassuring as his arms around Mischa.

Hannibal exhaled deeply with relief, approaching the two of them as grass grew and flowers bloomed around them, the wild meadows of the riverbanks of Will's memory palace merging with Hannibal's, providing another safe space for both him and Mischa.

She was safe with Will.

Hannibal joined the two of them and his gaze fell upon the space where the cross had been beyond the altar. Now he saw the ghost of his past, a last, colourful play of lights that reflected in the broken shards of his firefly wings. Then, with more ease than last time, Hannibal banished him to one of the most distant corners of his mind once more. Now he knew that whenever he might have to face him again, Will had forever transformed the human beast into a work of art, his design overshadowing and disarming the cruelty that lay beneath.

It was not only Mischa who found a loving home in the existence of Will Graham, but so did Hannibal.

Hannibal smiled faintly as he awoke, his eyes immediately meeting the ocean blue ones of Will opposite him.

"You're awake," Hannibal remarked, and his voice still felt a little hoarse from sleep and the intense emotions he had gone through the day prior.

"I didn't want to wake you," Will replied calmly, gently laying his hand on Hannibal's again. "How did you sleep?"

“Better,” Hannibal replied truthfully, slightly adjusting his posture, becoming aware of the tension of the previous night that had turned into soreness in his muscles.

“Good. I’m glad,” Will said softly, yet the expression of concern still lingered in his gaze.

“I did not have another nightmare, in case you were wondering… and I don’t want you to blame yourself for the one I experienced earlier last night. Nightmares, though disruptive in their nature, are a perfectly normal symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. It is nothing I have not experienced before, and nothing I will not overcome again in the future.”

Will nodded quietly, lowering his eyes.

“I just… I want you to know that it was not my intention to hurt you in any way. I’m sorry that I partook in triggering these nightmares for you…”

Hannibal leaned in a little closer to Will, gently pulling his hand away to rest upon his face instead, his thumb caressing the curve of his cheek bone.

“It felt good to share these parts of me with you. It feels like you have transformed and enlightened certain halls within my mind that may have forever remained closed off to me.”

Will closed his eyes for a moment, simply enjoying the gentleness of Hannibal’s touch.

“It should be me comforting you, you know…”

Hannibal smiled.

“You already did. More than you know.”

Will finally looked at him again, nodding slightly, finally accepting that Hannibal did not blame him as equally as his own conscience did.

Hannibal paused for a moment, withdrawing his hand as he turned to lie on his back, resting comfortably.

“When I came to the orphanage, after what happened, I suffered immensely from these nightmares. Every night, I would wake up screaming, and every day, I became more withdrawn from the people around me. Even the counsellor could not get through to me. The trauma had left me entirely unable to communicate. It was only when I began living with my uncle that I felt safe enough to express myself again.”

Will listened quietly, and given how he had come to get to know Hannibal Lecter, charming, well-spoken, intelligent and one of the most notorious serial killers of his generation, it was hard to imagine the obstacles he had overcome. The growing pains he had suffered to become the man he was now, laying next to Will, as fearless and ruthless as he was alluring.

“I’m glad you did…” Will replied softly, falling quiet again, waiting in case there was anything else Hannibal wanted to share with him in this rare moment of intimacy.

“I have not told you about that night yet. About the hunters. About Mischa. About my part in her death.”

“I figured you didn’t want to. I won’t ask, Hannibal.”

Hannibal turned his head, eyes slightly more distant as if already anticipating a moral judgement from the man next to him. The one he had allowed to come closer than anyone else.

“Aren’t you curious? Given your mind and work as a profiler, I imagine the origins of my cannibalism would be of the greatest professional and personal interest to you. The Chesapeake Ripper, born in human flesh and blood.”

Will felt his stomach turn at the tone in Hannibal’s voice, the hurt and defensiveness he masked with tight lips and provoking words.

“I’m not here because I am interested in the Chesapeake Ripper, Hannibal… we both know that chapter of our relationship closed a long time ago.”

Will sat up slightly, nervous as he reached out to Hannibal, yet he couldn’t resist.

He *needed* to show him somehow, make him see, even if his words would not suffice yet.

Carefully, yet not hesitantly he gently brushed a few unruly strands of hair out of Hannibal’s face, burying his fingers in his hair as he looked down at him.

“I know that you loved Mischa, and still love her to this day. And there is no doubt in my mind that her loss broke your heart… That's all I need to know. And it’s more than I deserve to know...”

Will could sense that his touch felt as new and exciting to Hannibal as it did to himself, hearts beating faster, scents spiking ever so slightly.

“Sharing these memories with you, with you allowing me to see more parts of the person that you are… It hasn’t changed how I feel about you. It won’t.”

Will felt Hannibal’s gaze wander, parting from his eyes only to linger on his lips. When their eyes met once more, Will felt his heartbeat loudly and clearly, and he could tell that for a brief moment, a thought lingered in the air between them. Neither of them dared to grasp it, to hold onto it and act upon it before it vanished once more.

Still, the remnants of it clung onto Will, the hand in Hannibal’s hair trembling ever so slightly as he leaned down to him, placing a brief, soft kiss to his forehead.

A gesture of protection.

Of compassion.

Of unconditional acceptance.

A promise left unspoken, expressed only in the touch of their skin and the mingling of their scents.

“No matter how deep your darkness goes… I will be there in the dark beside you, Hannibal. We may never share all our deepest secrets, or the most intimate of our thoughts… and I accept that about you, just as you accept it about me.”

Will smiled gently, carefully caressing Hannibal’s cheek, mirroring the gesture he had bestowed upon him only a moment ago, and that he still felt on his skin when he closed his eyes.

“I see you for who you are, Hannibal. And even if I cannot yet express myself in the way you do… I hope you can see me, too.”

“I do.”

Hannibal returned his smile, the expression in his eyes growing just as soft as he looked at Will. Then he pulled him down just a bit to return the kindness of his gesture with a kiss to his cheek, his lips lingering on his skin for a moment that felt like an eternal heartbeat, echoing in the chapel of the Norman Palace.

Adoration.

Affection.

Intimacy.

Will felt himself blush and averted his gaze, Hannibal’s presence quite positively too overwhelming to handle.

He took a deep breath and sat up, and he couldn’t resist a small chuckle, feeling both elated and overstimulated due to the intensity of the feelings between them at the same time.

Another deep exhale later he lazily ran a hand through his hair, shaking up the bed-head of curls that fell into his face, pulling himself back into the routine of normalcy.

“I’ll go get breakfast ready…”

A hint of concern and sobriety had returned to his voice as he got up and turned around to Hannibal.

“You join me whenever you feel like it, okay? Take your time…”

“I will,” Hannibal returned with a smile, looking after him for a moment before he, too, allowed himself to process their morning.

Especially that simple, small word was on his mind, which Will did not seem to have paid any conscious mind to. It had just come naturally to him.

Yet.

Will felt a subtle chill run down his spine as he felt Hannibal's presence, entering the kitchen.

He knew and felt that something between them had shifted, brought about by the new intimacy they shared, yet experiencing it still felt both alien and familiar at the same time, given their history.

Will looked down at the pan he had just put on the stove, cracking a few eggs into it once it had gotten hot enough, some of his deepest thoughts slowly floating to the surface of the stream in his memory palace.

"I didn't think I would ever feel the urge to share memories of my childhood with someone…"

"You did with me," Hannibal replied calmly, making himself useful beside Will. "A long time ago."

"I meant… outside of a therapy session."

Hannibal looked over at him, and Will's body language didn't let on too much confidence.

"Is that something you would like to do? Share your memories with me?"

Will's hand on the handle of the pan began to tremble, dark clouds swirling over the forest notes of his scent.

The scent of motor oil, sticking to their clothes, the salty water of the bay settling in Will's dark curls.

Moldy wood panels in their dark, cramped living room.

The dense, choking cigarette smoke whenever his father's poker buddies had come over.

A smoke that brought with it intimidating gazes, foul breath, and hands that were rough and strong from their labour, with little patience for a boy sensitive to the world around him, easily overwhelmed and hotheaded. Too difficult to control. Too defiant for his own good.

When his shoulders began to shake, his throat aching to suppress the sobs, Hannibal disregarded his own cooking and stepped over to him.

He closed his arms around Will from behind, firm and reassuring, Will's dark brown curls grazing his cheek as he leaned in closer.

"Your past is nothing to be ashamed of," Hannibal said calmly and quietly, pained by the outpour of emotions Will didn't allow himself to experience. "The words you said to me, Will, ring true for you just the same. Whatever happened, whatever you experienced that

shaped you into the man you are today, it is nothing I will not fully accept and cherish about you."

It took Will a while to calm down enough to speak without interrupting himself with sobs, barely keeping his wits about himself enough to turn off the stove eventually.

"I just-... I don't think I've worked through it quite as well as you have-..."

Hannibal smiled sadly, placing a soft kiss onto Will's shoulder.

"If you want to, I am sure that you will, eventually. I will aid you in whatever way you need. Even if that is to never speak of this matter again."

"That doesn't exactly sound like proper therapy…"

"I am not speaking as your therapist."

“Then who are you speaking as…?”

The words had left Will’s lips before he could hold them back, his heart beating faster at the implications that lingered between them.

Will knew he had no one to blame but himself for his lasting insecurities, the lack of clarity in their relationship he had brought about. He knew that once he admitted his feelings not only to himself but to Hannibal as well, he would feel a new sense of security. Of belonging.

Yet there was something deep inside of him that kept holding him back; the forts of his past, stronger and more indestructible than the others, guarding memories and experiences he did not dare to overcome quite yet.

Not without help.

“I will be whatever you need me to be. Whatever you allow me to be, Will,” Hannibal replied softly, one of his hands gently caressing the spot where his scars lingered underneath the fabric of his t-shirt. “If you’ll have me, I will gladly speak as your mate.”

Will swallowed dryly, his hands now resting upon Hannibal’s wrists, not sure if to hold him close or push him away.

“A man, an alpha of your standards no less, could do far better than settling for a fragile, broken teacup...”

Will stopped breathing as Hannibal pulled him even closer in reply, defiant and confident in his manner, lips gently pressing against the sensitive spot behind Will’s ear, close to his scent glands.

“There is a Japanese tradition called *kintsugi* that places great value upon the repair of what once was broken. Objects made even more beautiful by a golden joinery, giving value to the significance of their breakage. Your becoming is much the same, Will. Broken and mended, the same and yet transformed. I would not wish to ever regard anyone else but you.”

Will closed his eyes, and though his mind did not dare to accept Hannibal's words without the shadows of doubts and his own shortcomings, his soul and body surrendered easily.

He sank back into Hannibal's embrace, eyes closed as he allowed himself to just linger in the space they shared, to indulge in the comfort he found in Hannibal's scent and presence.

To indulge in how deeply his own instincts had already accepted Hannibal to be his other half.

Chapter 13

After Hannibal had left for work, Will had crawled back into bed for a short nap, feeling exhausted after the emotionally draining morning they had had.

Lying back in his own bed felt strange after having spent the night in Hannibal's with him, yet sleep found him quickly, enveloping him just as smoothly and comforting as his sheets.

Will dreamt of darkness and heat, of the touching of smooth skin and warm bodies, of the scent of sandalwood and lavender.

When Will awoke he felt just as warm and comfortable as he had in his dream, refusing to open his eyes for just a little longer, enjoying the enticing sensations that flooded his body.

He welcomed the heat he felt instead of urgently rushing to cool his skin and mind, embracing the arousal that pooled in his groin, even more so than he had on that lonesome night on the train.

Will's cheeks were flushed and he licked his lips, hands wandering over his lower body, tracing the touch Hannibal had bestowed on him earlier. His fingers slowly slipped underneath the fabric of his clothes, lazily stripping himself down until even the touch of his sheets seemed too confining and uncomfortable to tolerate.

Will rolled over onto his back, chills grazing his skin as he felt the gentle draught in the room touch his naked body. Slowly he parted his legs, hands savouring every touch as he reached down, one of his hands stroking his half-hard member while the other reached down just a little further, feeling how wet he already was.

He took his time, slowly circling his fingers, wetting them with slick. The memory of Hannibal's scents overcame his senses, making him ache for more, involuntarily moving his hips to gain more of the gratifying sensation he hadn't allowed himself to feel so freely in many years.

"Ah…!"

Will laid his head back, moaning as he slowly pushed two of his fingers inside, one after the other, not quite used to the sensation anymore. God, it had been too long, *way* too long.

He closed his fist around himself more firmly, stroking himself slowly as he picked up a similar rhythm to thrust his fingers inside, quickly aching to feel more, deeper, harder.

Impatiently he added yet another finger, moaning at the stretch. His muscles clenched around his fingers, eager to feel them even deeper, to be stretched more as Will felt Hannibal's arms around him, his hands touching him instead.

The mere thought of feeling Hannibal's warm, strong and talented fingers inside of him, accompanied by the vivid memory of his lips against Will's neck was enough to send him

over the edge, moaning loudly as he writhed in the sheets, back arched and hips trembling as he came.

Will felt even more slick wet his fingers, dripping down onto the sheets as he tried to catch his breath, his other hand now lazily resting on his stomach, not caring about the mess he had made of his body.

As Will slowly came to his senses, it wasn't guilt he felt, nor shame. Not this time.

It was satisfaction, an ache for more, like a deep hunger not quite sated yet.

Will closed his eyes for a moment, dwelling in the moment, wishing it to last until he had felt fully sure of himself.

He ached for Hannibal.

Emotionally, physically, mentally.

He ached for him just as much as Hannibal did, and keeping it to himself felt more and more like poisoning himself.

Slowly Will dragged himself out of bed and grabbed some fresh clothes, heading over into the bathroom to get himself into the shower.

He let the revitalising stream of water wash over his body, calming his mind enough to think, free of the cloudiness of his own arousal.

He needed to find a way to open up to Hannibal, for the sake of both of them, and soon.

When Will stepped out into the warm, Florentine sun he immediately knew where his feet would carry him that day.

It only took him a couple of minutes among the steady stream of tourists to reach the Uffizi Gallery, a place he had not yet visited in his many months spent in the city. Yet here, among the pieces of art of the rebirth of Italy, he was sure he would feel closer to Hannibal.

Will took his time to familiarise himself with the art and the artists that had found their home in the gallery, taking in the details he figured not only he would enjoy, but that might have caught Hannibal's eye.

It wasn't until he came across the large wooden canvas at the end of the hallway that Will felt truly drawn to the piece of art, mesmerised by the details, the vibrant colours against the dark background.

Will slowly approached the Botticelli, taking a seat on the bench right in front of the large artwork.

It wasn't the Roman god Mercury that caught Will's eye and captured his attention, not even the composition of the Three Graces. It wasn't Venus and Cupid above her that were placed in the centre of the painting, nor the beautifully adorned Flora, looking back at him, seeking his gaze.

It was the depiction of Zephyrus, god of the wind, reaching out and grabbing Chloris, a nymph of spring and flowers that Will felt drawn to like no other part of the paintings in the gallery, mesmerised by the contrasting blue and golden tones, the darkness of the trees around Zephyrus from which he emerged.

Much like Hannibal found great interest in Will's becoming, Will found himself to be far more drawn to the nymph, depicted in a simple and translucent veil, rather than her stage after her becoming; after her marriage to Zephyrus, and her transformation into Flora, the goddess of spring.

Will focused his attention on her gaze, directed towards Zephyrus, the flowers streaming from her mouth.

Just like Will, she had found herself confronted with a force of nature.

And just like Will, she had adapted. Evolved. Become an equal to the god that had once chased her, standing by his side as a goddess with just as much power over nature.

"Beautiful, isn't it, Signor Graham?"

Will flinched, ripped out of his thoughts, gone the movements of the veils, the falling of flower petals, the stream of wind he felt on his face.

"Commendatore Pazzi…" Will took a quick breath, readjusting to his surroundings, the subtle humming of quiet chatter of the people around him.

The inspector sat down beside Will, looking up at the same painting, and with an alarming similarity to his intentions.

"20 years ago, there was a young Lithuanian man sitting where you are sitting now. He came here many times, and everytime he recreated this part of the Primavera in pencil…"

Will felt his heart beat slightly faster, keeping a calm appearance on the outside as he listened to the detective.

"... until his recreation in pencil was no longer enough. It was practice. An adoration, and an obsession, which he transformed into a crime scene. Lovers, murdered and positioned in the bed of a truck in Impruneta, just like his favourite part of the Primavera."

Pazzi turned his head to look at Will, in his gaze a thirst for justice and determination in a way Will had often seen on Jack Crawford throughout their shared cases.

"*Il Mostro di Firenze*."

“The Monster of Florence…” Will repeated softly, gaze wandering back to Zephyrus and Chloris, the unexpected revelation of another piece of what undoubtedly belonged to Hannibal’s past.

“He was never caught,” Pazzi said, a bitterness in his voice that carried the frustration of a case that had never let him go for two decades. “There was simply no evidence. I was sure of the man who was guilty, yet another man innocent of his crimes had taken the fall for the crimes he had committed. The city of Florence found peace and quiet once more.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Never,” Pazzi agreed, seeking Will’s gaze again. “And I imagine you must feel the same, after the disappearance of the Chesapeake Ripper.”

“Hannibal Lecter doesn’t leave evidence,” Will replied calmly, rising from his seat, “He eats it.”

“Hence you would do quite well to stay as far away from the man as possible.”

Pazzi rose as well, his eyes still lingering on Will, unrelenting in a way that Will wasn’t sure whether he was being intentionally provocative or simply observant.

He leaned in closer, lowering his voice.

“You would do better in leaving Italy, Signor Graham. I am convinced that the broken man in the Cappella Palatina in Palermo was left here by the same man who committed all those crimes in Florence twenty years ago. And we both know that you and I are certainly not well-liked in his books.”

“You’re still hunting for him…” Will concluded quietly, a sense of unease and veiled pride overcame him, both at the prospect of Hannibal being in danger, as well as secretly being an ally to him in ways that Pazzi could never dream of. “What makes you think I am not doing the same?”

Doubt and shock overcame Pazzi so suddenly he had no chance to hide the glimpse of his true intentions from Will before his professionally trained mask slipped back into place. Whatever he was planning, Will would be aware of his presence and the threat of his involvement now.

“Then I sincerely hope, Signor Graham, that whoever finds him first will have the mercy of God on his side.”

Will looked after Pazzi as he left, following him quietly through the gallery and back onto the streets, disappearing among the crowd of tourists until he was able to make sure that Pazzi had left in a completely different direction with no intentions of turning back around to him.

Will took a deep, calm breath, stood right at the level of the entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio.

He turned right and looked upon the imposing city hall, his gaze lingering on the balcony that he recognised from so many descriptions of the death of Francesco de Pazzi, publicly hung

for all the world to see his guilt and take part in witnessing his shameful death.

Will let his gaze wander aimlessly among the crowds of people again.

He knew that if the inspector did not cease his investigation on his own accord, there would only be one choice remaining to ensure Hannibal's safety: to carry on the legacy of Francesco's death in his descendant.

Dusk was setting over the city when Hannibal set foot outside the library, and to his delight, he found Will waiting for him there.

Will was dressed more neatly than he usually did. A pair of dark blue suit trousers, black belt and shiny black shoes, along with a crisp white dress shirt of which he had rolled the sleeves up to accommodate for the evening heat of the setting sun.

"This is quite a surprise, Will," Hannibal smiled as he approached him, with no one left around to witness their conversation or the use of their real names.

"I hope it's not an ill-timed one," Will replied calmly, smiling back at Hannibal. "I figured, maybe you'd like to go out for dinner tonight."

"Sounds like a very welcome change of plans," Hannibal agreed, slowly letting his eyes wander over Will's outfit once more. He was freshly showered, even wearing the aftershave Hannibal had bought for him weeks ago, no trace left of the insecurities they had shared that morning at home. "Is this a date, then?"

Will returned his question with a glint in his eyes, his smile turning just a little wider.

"I would hope so. If you'll have me."

"How could I refuse?"

Hannibal smiled at him lovingly and they went on their way, leaving the Palazzo Capponi.

"Have you picked a destination for this special occasion yet, Will?"

"Yes."

Will walked beside him calmly, keeping a comfortable pace that contrasted the restrained astonishment Hannibal would feel only a moment later.

"Impruneta."

Chapter 14

The sun had set and night had fallen over Impruneta as they arrived, with Hannibal easily navigating the streets even though he had not been to this part of Florence in 20 years.

As Hannibal stopped the vehicle, Will let go of him and got off the motorcycle, shaking his curls back into place with a quick hand motion after he took off his helmet.

"I never knew you knew how to drive these…"

Hannibal took off his helmet and revealed his smile.

"After your surprising suggestion, I suppose it was my turn to baffle you instead."

Will handed him the helmet as he reached for it and smiled, keeping the thought to himself of how attractive he found Hannibal in that moment.

Hannibal smiled, smoothing his own hair back into place.

"Shall we? I know an excellent place for dinner."

"Sounds promising," Will replied calmly, enjoying the change of scenery. "Lead the way."

The temperature had cooled a little more significantly as they left the small restaurant, exchanging the noise of the tavern for the quiet of the streets, far less busy than they would have been at home.

"Thank you for inviting me, even though this was my idea," Will said, his cheeks slightly blushed from warmth, wine and laughter.

"The pleasure was all mine," Hannibal replied simply, glad to have Will to himself now, away from the noise and people.

Will's smile faded, yet his expression became curious and hopeful.

"Would you show me around?"

Will gently grazed the back of Hannibal’s hand with his fingertips, not quite daring enough to take his hand in public, but still feeling the ache to touch him, growing stronger with every second that they spent together.

"I would love to see the streets through your eyes…"

Hannibal paused for a moment, letting the touch between them linger, fragile and fleeting like a butterfly.

"How could I ever deny you something you asked for so nicely?"

Will smiled and followed Hannibal into the darkness of the side streets and alleys, nothing but their footsteps echoing around them for a while before Hannibal began to talk.

"You know about my muse, I take it?"

"Botticelli," Will replied, nodding softly. "I saw it earlier today. It was… magnificent."

He looked over at Hannibal, who smiled fondly at Will's shared enthusiasm.

"I felt quite the same way. So much so that I wished for nothing more than to be able to capture *La Primavera*'s very essence."

"And you did."

Hannibal smiled, shaking his head slightly.

"In hindsight, I was merely a copycat. Recreating someone else's design rather than being confident in my own. I recreated what I saw and wished to emulate. *Il Mostro* will forever embody the transformative stages of my youth, which then allowed me to evolve my design."

"And become The Chesapeake Ripper," Will completed his thoughts, and found his own wandering back to the firefly man.

"I wonder if that's what I did. Imitate you," he mused out loud, enjoying the cool air on his heated skin.

"I wish I could have seen it," Hannibal replied truthfully, rounding a corner with Will into a small alleyway that silently unlocked doors upon doors in Hannibal's memory palace.

Will stopped as Hannibal did, taking a look around.

"Here?" Will asked after a brief pause.

Hannibal nodded.

Will took in the details of the side street, houses flanked by decorative rather than functional pillars, a street just wide enough to drive a car through.

A truck, its bed filled with the cargo of many sleepless nights for the Florentine people.

Lovers, forever frozen in a moment of hunt and anticipation.

Will closed his eyes, swallowing down the anxiety that dared to overcome him, feelings of being inadequate and overwhelmed.

"Why are we here, Will?"

Hannibal's voice was soft, yet with a hint of tension to it, like a question that had been on his mind ever since Will had greeted him at the Capponi.

Will closed his eyes and saw the pendulum swing once again, gone the lovers of the past, only their legacy remaining.

Hunt and anticipation.

Adapting and becoming.

Avoidance and acceptance.

"Because I don't want to run anymore…"

Will turned around and looked back at Hannibal, approaching him carefully like one would a wounded animal.

"Like Chloris from Zephyrus," Hannibal concluded softly, finding himself and Will standing in the exact same spot he had entered and left alone twenty years ago.

"Yes…"

Will's reply was spoken softly and quietly, almost drowned out by the sound of his own heartbeat as he carefully reached out to Hannibal, placing one hand upon his cheek, then the other, gently cupping his face.

Will looked into Hannibal's eyes one last time yet found no resistance, so he crossed the distance between them, slightly pulling Hannibal down towards himself as he kissed him.

Hannibal put his arms around him and pulled him in closer, replying his kiss just as softly, yet with a sense of longing to it that made the hair at the back of Will's neck stand on end.

His lips were softer than Will had imagined, hands warm and firm against his back, and Will couldn't help but moan softly against his lips as Hannibal took over control of their kiss. He was no longer holding back, proving to Will once again just how much he wanted this, and wanted it with him.

Will felt Hannibal's hands down on his hips as he slowly manoeuvred him for a few steps until Will felt one of the pillars against his back, allowing Hannibal to encompass his body even more.

"Hannibal…"

Will moaned softly between kisses as he felt Hannibal's tongue against his lips, gaining permission to deepen their kiss with practised ease.

Will replied his kiss just the same, allowing himself to pour all of his feelings into it, the plain veil of the nymph Chloris slowly growing into the graceful goddess of spring, adorned in flowers of all shapes in sizes.

He held onto Hannibal's shoulders, his grip tightening on the fabric of his shirt as he felt Hannibal's hips pressing against his own, one of his legs now between Will's, both easily

pinning him in place and making him painfully aware of just how much he enjoyed being touched by Hannibal.

Will gently broke away from his lips, desperately needing a moment to catch his breath, yet finding himself aching and lost in the moment even more as he felt Hannibal's lips on his neck instead, wet and hot right above his pulse.

Will shivered slightly, legs almost giving out under him as Hannibal kissed a trail along his neck, grazing his scent glands, almost making Will forget himself entirely then and there.

Will licked his lips, panting softly as he buried his hand in Hannibal's hair, pulling him into another passionate kiss.

Will moved against him willingly, yet pulled away as he felt the urge to grind his crotch against Hannibal's leg, becoming increasingly aware of the familiar warmth in his body, the wetness between his legs along with how hard he was getting.

Will leaned his forehead against Hannibal's shoulder, almost as if to hide himself away from how entirely too comfortable they were being in public.

Hannibal gave a small chuckle and buried one of his hands in Will's curls, gently sliding down towards his nape, calming him.

Will cursed Hannibal's seemingly perfect self-control, displayed despite the fact how clearly he could sense that Hannibal enjoyed himself just as much as he did.

"Perhaps I needed to return to this place… to discover a rebirth with you, Will. A new life. A new beginning, a spring to the cold, dark seasons we endured…"

Will nodded slightly, then turned his head, placing a firm, yet soft kiss to Hannibal's neck.

He could see the way Hannibal's pupils dilated even in the sparse light, the surprise and possessiveness written clearly on the alpha's face.

"Our very own *primavera*, even without the Botticelli…"

Hannibal nodded calmly and watched Will closely as his hands slowly wandered down to rest on Hannibal's chest, avoiding his gaze as he became more aware of his surroundings.

"I don't… I don't want to do this in public, Hannibal…"

Hannibal could clearly smell Will's arousal, the change in his scent barely masked by the expensive aftershave, the alluring, irresistible pheromones of an unmated omega.

"Of course," Hannibal replied softly, giving Will a little more room to breathe and calm down, yet without losing his touch on him.

A hint of jealousy and possessiveness tinted Hannibal's scent. Seeing Will like this, hearing his pleas and experiencing his arousal was for Hannibal, and Hannibal alone to see. No one else should ever be allowed to witness him like this, least of all another alpha.

Hannibal opened his mouth, yet Will immediately shut him up with a breathless chuckle.

"*Don't* apologise, Hannibal, I swear to God-..."

Hannibal smiled back at Will, gently taking one of his hands into his, kissing the back of his fingers.

"Fine, then."

Will leaned in closer and kissed his lips one more time, sweet and chaste and so full of fragile adoration it only reminded Hannibal once more of how entirely he enjoyed surrendering to the unpredictable nature of Will Graham.

Will smiled at him, his thumb gently caressing Hannibal’s cheek.

"Let's go home…"

Chapter 15

The church bells had chimed midnight long ago when Will and Hannibal returned to their apartment, their pheromones lingering on their skin beneath their clothes, the fresh, cool night air seeped into the fabrics.

Will closed the door behind himself, lock sliding into place, and only a moment later he felt Hannibal's arms around him, body aligning with his own from behind.

"Thank you…"

Hannibal gently pressed his lips against Will's shoulder, his voice merely a whisper between them.

"I never would have thought that I would tread the streets of Impruneta again. Less so in the company of the only person who is capable of relating to what I had felt there all those years ago."

Will closed his eyes, the images and impressions of Sandro Botticelli's *La Primavera* appearing before his eyes, overlapping into yet another image of one of Hannibal's early tableaus.

"I'm grateful that you shared this place with me…" Will replied softly, carefully turning around in Hannibal's arms, finding himself similarly trapped as he had been in the alleyway. "I hope I didn't taint its memory for you…"

Hannibal smiled, calmly and slowly his thumb ran over Will's bottom lip, despite how clearly his scent contrasted his restraint, possessiveness and longing in its nature.

"You have given me a rare gift, Will… Being seen by you has changed me. For better or for worse, I will always want to find myself in your sight."

Will's lips parted softly as he turned his head, placing a gentle kiss to the palm of Hannibal's hand in response.

"And I will always want you… right here, with me…"

Hannibal placed his hand upon Will's cheek, finding his lips in a long, sweet kiss, allowing them both to savour the sensations of their touch.

This time it was Will who dared to ask for more, his hands resting on Hannibal's hips as he gently tugged at his lower lip with his teeth. Teasing, yet careful. Longing, yet playful.

Hannibal moaned softly against his lips, the sensation of which echoed through Will's entire body, lighting his senses on fire in need for more.

Having spent so many years of his life in solitude, Will wondered how he had ever endured not being touched, not being loved and held by another person for so long.

In hindsight those years seemed like an eternity, leaving him starving for a touch, a kiss, a meaningful connection.

Finally, he had found it.

"Hannibal…"

Will parted from him gently, holding him close as he felt overwhelmed by his own emotions, even more so by those of Hannibal he so intimately experienced.

He felt his heart beat in his throat, hands trembling slightly, tears dwelling in his eyes as his emotions desperately sought a way out into the world, droplets leaving a brimming cup.

Will took a slow, deep breath before he finally felt ready, able to look at Hannibal, face the emotions he would no doubt see in his eyes as well, capturing the secrets Will could no longer keep to himself.

"I love you…"

Hannibal’s thumbs gently caught the tears that fell onto Will's cheek, carefully wiping them away as he leaned in for another kiss, so deep and full of affection that Will could do nothing but cling to him and hope not to be swept away by the unruly waves in his mind.

When Will could finally look at him again he saw Hannibal calmly blink away a few tears before he met his eyes, a smile on his face so full of adoration and trust that Will felt his heart ache in his chest.

"I love you, too, Will. More than I can ever hope to make you understand."

Will leaned in closer, embracing Hannibal as he buried his face at the crook of his neck, both of them holding each other for a long time, neither daring to break away first, to sever the bond between them for even the shortest of times.

After a while, Will slowly turned his head, lips gently pressed against Hannibal’s neck, a gesture of mutual trust between them.

He could sense the immediate spike in Hannibal’s scent, the way his grip on Will tightened ever so slightly, the alpha inside of him longing for the connection Will offered him so willingly.

Hannibal took a deep, calming breath, reining in the urges of his instincts, just for Will to tempt him once more, small, firm kisses placed along the length of Hannibal’s neck.

Hannibal gently pulled him back a bit, bringing just enough space between them so he could look at him.

“Though I enjoy your advances, Will, I should warn you that playing into my instincts quite so directly might cause me to follow them just as bluntly.”

“I never thought there was any moment in time where you would lose control…” Will whispered softly, genuinely surprised that he could have an effect just as impactful on Hannibal as he did on him.

Hannibal looked at him for a moment, his expression slightly saddening as he remembered the smell of Will’s blood on his hands, staining the floors of his memory palace with an irreversible mistake.

“I do, when it concerns you.”

The comment gave Will pause, equally reassuring and unnerving, yet it felt good to know that it was not only him who lost his mind when it came to Hannibal.

Will looked down between them, one of his hands now lingering above his scars without him having a conscious thought of executing the protective gesture.

Hannibal followed his gaze, equally hurt by the reminder of their past that he had left them with, and that now lingered between them quite so obviously.

Will lowered his hand, gently extending it to rest on Hannibal’s hip instead, a careful smile on his face.

“I could use a drink… What about you?”

Hannibal gladly accepted his peace offering of averting their attention away from Will’s scars, and with a final, gentle kiss to the back of Will’s hand, he parted from him and led the way into their dining room.

When Hannibal had poured their drinks he found Will by the window, his gaze lingering on the illuminated front view of Santa Maria Novella.

He stepped over to him, smiling softly as he handed Will his whiskey, before enjoying his own red wine.

Will thanked him and took a sip of his whiskey, feeling soothed by the familiar sting and warmth of alcohol.

Hannibal watched him lazily swirl the amber liquid in his glass, Will’s attention still focused on something far beyond Hannibal’s gaze.

“You’re drinking more again these days. I thought you had intentionally remained abstinent while getting used to the new suppressants,” Hannibal remarked softly, positioning himself just a little closer to Will.

Will looked down at his glass, contemplating his answer for a moment.

“I don’t think they’re working, to be honest… I… I keep having these dreams. Then there’s the heat, waking me up in the middle of the night…”

“They don’t suppress your scent fully, either,” Hannibal added calmly.

Will turned his head, confused as he looked back at Hannibal.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Hannibal smiled calmly, pressing a soft kiss behind Will’s ear.

“Because it took me a while to confirm that it only ever happened when I was alone with you…”

“You mean-”

Will opened his mouth, then fell silent again.

“I did not tamper with them, if that is your concern. The instructions I had given to the pharmacist, as well as the medication they gave you were very real. There was no intentional manipulation on my part.”

Will felt his heart skip a beat, stomach dropping with dread.

“What do you mean *intentional*…?”

Hannibal remained entirely calm, taking a sip of wine before he answered. A gesture to soothe his own nerves just as much as Will’s.

“There are only very few medical conditions which allow an omega to show increasing symptoms of an impending heat while also being on suppressants, especially those as highly dosed as yours. Since we can exclude the probability of the majority of them, only one plausible answer would remain.”

Will felt the pause between them, the silence of revelation weighing on him more with every second that passed.

“I always thought it was a myth… A fairytale constructed by society. Like ‘love at first sight’.”

“It has become increasingly rare in documentation in our modern times, yes,” Hannibal agreed softly, taking another sip of wine as his gaze wandered over Santa Maria Novella in the distance. “Yet not impossible, or entirely unheard of.”

“I never believed in destiny…” Will replied quietly, incredulously. “Less so if it meant that the goddess of chance would rule in my favour for once.”

“Perhaps it has less to do with noble Fortuna, and more to do with a benevolent Venus…” Hannibal mused, his cheek gently pressed against Will’s hair as he held him from behind,

both for support and to enjoy the newly found luxury of being close to him after so many months and years of painful distance.

“True mates…” Will muttered quietly, still not daring to be too hopeful, too excited about the prospect of what a connection like it could mean for his and Hannibal’s future together. “Is there a way to know for sure?”

Hannibal chuckled softly, the answer quite so obvious, yet only making sense finally being put in its proper context, like a missing puzzle piece finally sliding into the right place.

“Why else would I have gone into a rut shortly after you started having feverish dreams of heat, Will? I must confess, in those moments when I assisted you at night I was solely concerned with your health and safety, but as always, you remain to have quite the extraordinary effect on me…”

Will swallowed dryly, emptying his glass in an effort to wet his parched throat.

“You mean… I triggered your rut, even though I was on suppressants, just because I started exhibiting heat symptoms?”

“Indeed.”

“And if I stopped taking the suppressants now…”

“... it could further confirm our connection, yes,” Hannibal confirmed, his thumb gently caressing Will as he talked.

“Usually an omega would need weeks to adjust to their own cycle of pheromones again and to get the suppressive medication fully out of their system. If you stopped your suppressants now, and your body went into heat within the next two weeks, it could be a strong indicator that your body’s desire to connect with mine is one of ancient and mutual instinct, rather than following the biology of an omega who does not carry the evolutionary traits to bond with a true mate.”

Will remained silent for a while, allowing Hannibal’s words to sink in.

“To be honest… it would explain my dreams. I feel like they were increasingly centred around your scent…” Will turned his head only slightly, gently rubbing against Hannibal’s, placing one of his hands on Hannibal’s arm which was still wrapped around him. “It felt like your presence got stronger. More vivid each time. More… difficult to resist…”

“And did you?” Hannibal asked quietly, lips close to Will’s skin. “Resist?”

Will closed his eyes, and immediately he was back on the train, in Hannibal’s bed, in his own desperately aching for his touch.

“No…” Will replied so softly that his breath barely carried his answer, yet he felt the effect of his confession resonate in both of their bodies as clearly as he could see the ripples of disruption on the surface of a quiet lake.

“Then what would you have me do, Will?”

Hannibal’s voice was quiet, rough with curiosity and anticipation of the arousal he could begin to smell on Will.

“You touched me…” Will hesitated for a moment, then closed his eyes as he leaned back further against Hannibal, feeling safe enough with him to admit to his most private thoughts and fantasies. “Everywhere…”

Will felt the low, animalistic growl in Hannibal’s chest rather than he heard it, chills ran down his spine as he did, heat building underneath his skin.

Hannibal let his hand wander over Will’s lower abdomen more intentionally now, just shy of his belt as if to await Will’s permission to progress further.

“And which part of that did you enjoy most?”

Will heard the gentle sound of wood and glass as Hannibal set his wine aside, his other arm wrapping around Will’s chest, holding him close.

Will moaned silently as he felt Hannibal’s lips against his neck, warm and firm in their touch, promising, giving him a taste of things to come.

He turned his head slightly, his heart beating heavily underneath Hannibal’s hand which he slowly ran over his chest.

“Your fingers inside of me…”

Hannibal inhaled sharply, leaning in closer to kiss Will’s lips as he willingly turned his head, replying his kiss just as longingly and desperately.

Will’s hand that still rested on Hannibal’s wrist gently guided him down to the buckle of his belt, silently answering the question Hannibal’s hands on him posed.

He held onto Hannibal tighter, feeling like he was losing his grip on reality with the pheromones and arousal he was exposed to as Hannibal undid his belt, button and zipper of his pants, his warm fingers slowly diving beneath the fabric of his underwear.

Will’s hips twitched slightly, eagerly moving towards his touch, embarrassment mixing with his arousal as he realised how hard and wet just the mere thought of Hannibal’s hands on him had made him.

“Mh…”

Will moaned against Hannibal’s lips as he wrapped his fingers around him, stroking him slowly but firmly, exploring the details of his body that now pressed more urgently against his own, desperate for contact.

“Hannibal…!”

Will gasped, clinging onto him as he felt his hand slide further down between his legs, warm, strong fingers exploring how wet and soft he was, Will's body eager and ready to accept him.

"Yes, my love?"

Hannibal's voice was low and quiet, deep with possessiveness and lust, yet it was the pet name that made Will's legs feel weak, overstimulating him almost as much as finally being touched by the alpha he longed for so deeply.

"Please… don't stop-..."

Hannibal smiled, placing a trail of kisses along the scent glands at Will's neck, his other hand slowly caressing Will's chest before eventually resting above his sternum for a moment, fingers slowly travelling upwards to reach his neck and jaw, positioning Will and holding him in place with ease.

"You won't ever have to beg for me to take care of you, Will… understood?"

Will nodded weakly, just enough to make himself known, before he laid his head back further with a loud moan, resting against Hannibal's shoulder as he felt one of his fingers finally slip inside of him.

"God, Hannibal-..."

Will tensed around him slightly, eager to keep him inside, feel him more, deeper, giving him the sensation of feeling full that he ached for so desperately.

Gladly, Hannibal obliged.

Slowly, fully enjoying and savouring this moment he added a second, then a third finger, feeling only little resistance as he did, and the intrusive image of how well Will would take his knot fully settled in his mind.

Will's grip on him tightened even more, pulse quick and prominent underneath Hannibal's hand, his own mind slowly feeling increasingly clouded, like a thick layer of fog veiling all rational thinking, all the shame and insecurities he might have initially felt upon letting Hannibal get so close to him.

Will's hips bucked slightly, meeting the shallow thrusts of Hannibal's fingers, his cock sensitive and leaking as it rubbed against Hannibal's forearm with every movement in the confined space.

With Will getting closer to his climax Hannibal increased the speed and intensity of his thrusts, holding him as close to his own body as he physically could, burying his face in the crook of Will's neck.

Will screamed hoarsely as he came in his arms, driven over the edge by the intimate and overstimulating sensation of Hannibal's teeth sinking into his neck, not deep enough for a mating bite, yet definitely deep enough to leave a mark, an illusion of the connection they might share.

Hannibal watched as Will's chest rose and fell quickly, his body sinking even more into his embrace, desperate for his touch, his comfort, the sensation of being safe and satisfied.

Carefully Hannibal withdrew his fingers, making sure not to overwhelm Will all too much as he grazed his cock, both arms now once again wrapped around his waist.

It took Will a while to regain his wits about him, fog still barely clearing up as he placed soft, brief kisses along Hannibal's neck and jaw, feeling drunk with pheromones and his own lust.

"Fuck… I think this might be the only time my imagination doesn't even come close to reality…"

Hannibal chuckled softly, ignoring Will's profanity.

"I would prefer to keep it that way when it comes to our shared experiences."

Will laughed, shoulders shaking softly as Hannibal held him, hands smooth and calming on his abdomen.

"What about you, then?"

Hannibal smiled calmly, the adoration in his eyes as he looked at Will easily masking his concern, brought about by how obviously Will fell into a headspace that was ruled solely by his instincts rather than his own free will.

"I will discuss my fantasies with you another time. I believe we have had a plentiful share of revelations tonight already."

Will chuckled softly and slowly turned around, finally able to properly hold Hannibal as well.

He contemplated his words for a while, instincts urging him to push and insist, to prove to the alpha in front of him that he was well worthy of his company, yet the longer Will took to wrap his tongue around the words, the clearer his mind became once more.

Gently he placed a hand on Hannibal's cheek, thumb running over his bottom lip.

"Promise me you won't hold back for my sake, either?"

Hannibal's mind wandered to Will's sleepless nights, his fear and terrors, his isolation and solitude. The trauma he barely kept under lock and key, hidden away in the deepest, darkest corner of the closet full of monsters, and the way it had made him cry on Hannibal's shoulder until he could barely breathe.

"I will never promise you any such thing," Hannibal simply, yet kindly replied, cutting off Will's objection with a long, gentle kiss, "I can promise you, however, that I will openly share my thoughts and needs regarding our intimacy with you."

Will needed a moment to decode his words under the last remnants of the fog, before nodding softly.

“Sounds good to me…”

He smiled softly, eyes more focused now as he looked at Hannibal, still painfully aware of how much restraint it must have cost him to solely focus on Will just then.

“And what do you need right now, Hannibal?”

Hannibal smiled just a little wider, reaching for his wine and taking a sip before sharing his glass with Will.

“A nice shower and you, peacefully asleep, sharing my bed.”

Will laughed and nodded along, the exhaustion of the night catching up to him more quickly than it did to Hannibal.

“I’m sure that can be arranged…”

Chapter 16

Will buried his face in his pillow as he woke up, still feeling sated and quite comfortable being surrounded by Hannibal's scent, even if he was missing his presence beside him.

He sighed softly, curling up even more, keeping his eyes closed for a while.

In hindsight, it was still hard for Will to believe how last night had played out. How what had been intended to be a simple date had finally been the catalyst he had needed to overcome his own hesitations towards Hannibal and their relationship. His own feelings even more so.

Finally, he opened his eyes, looking at the empty space in the large bed beside him.

Hannibal had stayed true to his word and had not further initiated anything sexual between them, yet Will found himself to be equally relieved and insecure at the imbalance in their intimacy.

Perhaps it was their past calling out to him, how unnerving it had been to have had Hannibal inside, in his head, in his abdomen, with no further control on his part. Perhaps this anxiety was something that Will needed to either live with, or get equal with Hannibal in some way.

He sighed as he sat up, rubbed the sleepiness from his face, and finally got out of bed.

Will smiled as he saw the breakfast table Hannibal had laid for him, along with a slim, rectangular box, wrapped like a gift.

Will took the small note that Hannibal had left along with it, observing his neat, perfect handwriting.

Please be ready to leave by 8PM. - H

When Will loosened the ribbon, tied into a bow and lifted the lid of the box, he found a beautiful midnight blue suit in it, specifically tailored to fit him.

He smiled softly, shaking his head slightly as he could only guess what special and fancy occasion Hannibal had picked for them for him to need such an exquisite piece of clothing.

-

"So. Will you finally tell me where you are taking me, then?"

Hannibal smiled excitedly as he finished his dinner, Will's impatience lingering in the air between them ever since he had returned home.

“I would never spoil a surprise for you, Will.”

Will bit back a smile and took a sip of his wine, his own cutlery already laid aside.

“Would you like some more?”

“Wine or food?”

“Either.”

Will shook his head, sighing softly.

“I’m full, thank you. Also feeling a bit… nervous.”

Hannibal took a sip of his wine as well, lost in thought for a moment.

“Would you regard this as our first or our second date, then?”

Will laughed, and it felt easy and genuine to tear down some of his forts around Hannibal more and more. Piece by piece.

“Definitely the second…” Will replied, emptying his wine and quietly setting down his glass on the table, turning the stem between his fingers.

Hannibal smiled at him for a moment, then subtly looked him up and down, not yet changed into his new attire so as to not ruin his suit over dinner.

“You’re not taking your suppressants anymore.”

Will unclenched his jaw, becoming aware once more of the underlying tension in his body in that moment.

“I stopped last night. It seemed kind of… pointless. Taking them, while being so close to you.” Will raised his eyes, directly looking at Hannibal, his voice calm and smooth. “Reacting to you the way I do.”

“And to prove the hypothesis whether there is more to it than circumstance.”

Will nodded.

True mates.

It still sounded like the stuff of an ancient Greek legend to him, rather than his own potential reality.

“Two weeks, you said.”

Hannibal nodded.

Will followed his gaze as he looked down at his wine glass for a moment longer, holding onto it.

He did not need to think twice on whether or not to reach out to Hannibal, crossing the familiar distance of their dining table and briefly grazing the back of Hannibal's hand.

Will smiled as he met his gaze once more.

"At the most."

"At most," Hannibal agreed, smiling calmly, before changing the subject with a glance at the clock. "You should get ready now, Will. I will clean up here."

Will nodded softly, knowing there was no use in arguing back and forth with Hannibal on the matter of who got ready first.

Will rose from his chair, his hand gently lingering on Hannibal's shoulder for a moment before he left for the bathroom to take a shower and get changed.

The perfume Hannibal had bought him, the suit, the invitation to spend another evening outside of their home together after mere months of coexisting within the same space felt like the most welcome surprise all within itself.

Most rewarding, however, was the way Hannibal looked at him as Will returned to him, approaching him as he sat by the fireplace, only the gentle scratching of his pencil on the paper of his sketchbook interrupting the silence in between the crackling of burning wood.

Will was sure that if Hannibal had been a man of lesser self-control and composure that he would have made his jaw drop.

"You should get ready now, too, you know."

Hannibal smiled at the cheeky tone in Will's voice, taking a moment to merely observe the new, yet familiar image of Will before him.

Unruly brown curls tamed and neatly styled in a more chic, slicked back style with a clean parting, beard slightly trimmed, fitting the elegance of the midnight blue suit and bow tie that contrasted the crisp white dress shirt underneath, all the way down to the polished dress shoes.

The version of Will that stood before him now had come far from the FBI special agent and teacher that Hannibal had once upon a time met in the office of Jack Crawford, and his change had not just been superficial.

"You look magnificent, Will."

Will chuckled, his cheeks blushing ever so slightly as he avoided Hannibal's eyes.

"Just get ready, would you…?"

-

When Will exited their rental car he felt like he found himself in another world.

A world full of shiny jewellery and expensive ball gowns, classic suits and easily excitable small talk, accompanied by the light beige colour and pearly bubbles of champagne.

“I’ve never been to the opera before,” Will remarked more to himself than to Hannibal, trying to keep his body language calm and relaxed despite how desperately out of place he felt amongst these finely dressed people and scholars, some of them Hannibal’s colleagues, no doubt.

“Then it will be my greatest pleasure to accompany you to your first,” Hannibal replied with a gentle smile. “Shall we?”

He subtly rested a hand on Will’s lower back, leading him through the crowd and calming him down in the same motion.

Will found they had excellent seats, probably some of the best in the entire house, even if it was a bit more unconventional than he would have thought.

Instead of a broad, closed-off theatre like the one he had once found one of Tobias Budge’s victims in, they were seated in a kind of amphitheatre, imitating the plays of ancient times, with the stars of the night sky above to provide the most beautiful ceiling to the stage.

“You still haven’t told me which opera it is.”

Hannibal smiled as he looked at Will, not any less stunning in his black tuxedo that mirrored Will’s own.

“*La Vita Nuova*.”

Will’s lips parted slightly, mind racing again as he almost felt overwhelmed with how affirming and comforting Hannibal’s gesture was to him.

“It is based on the text by the same name that was written by Dante in the late 13th century,” Hannibal explained with a smile, faintly scenting the air between them, helping Will to stay calm and focused. “I particularly enjoy the aria that was based on *A ciascun'alma presa*, a sonnet from the third chapter. I hope you will like it, too.”

Will nodded softly, looking up to the stars above them for a moment, feeling a deep sense of freedom and belonging that was finally settling in his bones for the first time in his life.

“I am sure I will…”

Hannibal had subtly and silently pointed out the aria to Will by placing his hand on his thigh, his own attention otherwise focused intently on the stage before them, and Will didn't need the ability to speak Italian or know the sonnet word for word to understand his passion.

Will had still felt deeply moved during the aria, music and voices translating the feelings to him that were beyond language, and that resonated deep within his heart.

"It was beautiful," Will commented after the opera had eventually come to an end and they were leaving their seats, lazily following the stream of people that had traded their respectful silence for chatter and laughter once more, enjoying the accommodations in the foyer area.

"I am delighted that you enjoyed it," Hannibal replied with a smile, taking two glasses of champagne from a server that passed them and handing one to Will. "Not everyone can appreciate the art, or share the same passion for the opera."

"I don't think it's just the art itself," Will replied, taking a sip of his champagne, soothing his high-strung nerves that felt exhausted after the catharsis of the opera. "It's the feelings. They just… they permeate everything about it."

Hannibal looked at Will for a long time, wondering how different or similar an experience his empathy disorder had allowed him to have that night.

"They do."

"The aria you liked… what's it called?"

"*Vide Cor Meum*," Hannibal smiled, enjoying Will's interest, their shared fondness of the same musical piece.

"See My Heart," Will translated softly, taking another sip of his drink, "Seems fitting…"

For a moment, just so long as he looked at Hannibal, everything around them seemed to blur, moving out of focus, leaving Will with a perfect image captured between the two of them.

A brief moment, frozen in time, forever preserved in their memory palaces.

Yet it was just as fleeting, fragile, breaking into tiny shards like shattering crystals as Will averted his eyes from Hannibal, and looked right into those of Detective Inspector Rinaldo Pazzi.

Chapter 17

“Signor Graham."

Will moved as calmly and smoothly as Hannibal as they turned their attention towards him, sharks floating in deep waters, approaching their prey, yet his hand still holding onto his champagne glass turned cold with a deep, instinctual response, freezing after pondering between fight or flight indecisively.

Pazzi was accompanied by a much younger woman, both sharing the same model of wedding ring, and his gaze that lingered between Will and Hannibal was enough to make the sound of blood rush in Will’s ears.

“How nice to see you again.”

Pazzi’s words were cordial in choice, yet not entirely so in tone, the same cold distance accompanying them as did his gaze that lingered on Hannibal for a moment too long to be coincidental.

Impression.

Perception.

Revelation.

It was then that Will knew Pazzi had found his *Il Mostro*.

“And you too, Inspector Pazzi.”

Will smiled dryly, gesturing with the restraints of social politeness in Hannibal’s direction.

“This is Dr. Roman Fell. He is the new curator at the Capponi Library.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Dottore,” Pazzi offered along with a firm handshake that was easily returned in kind by Hannibal.

“And you, Inspector. This is your wife, I take it?” Hannibal smiled at Pazzi, then at the younger woman next to him.

“Allegra Pazzi,” the woman introduced herself, and her smile was much more generous and genuine than that of her husband. “It is a pleasure to meet you both. Did you enjoy the performance?”

“Very much so,” Hannibal returned, sounding just as friendly.

Will could not help but admire and envy how at ease Hannibal was, how naturally the masking and socialising came to him.

“I think it is such a beautiful, yet sorrowful story…” Allegra's thoughts trailed off, her attention now solely focused on Hannibal, the prestige of coming in touch with a scholar of this very field to discuss her impressions. “Dr. Fell, do you believe a man could become so obsessed with a woman, from a single encounter?”

Hannibal’s gaze lingered on Will for a moment, too long for Will to not notice, too short for Allegra to interpret in the way that would remain hidden to her.

“Could he daily feel a stab of hunger and find nourishment in the very sight of her? I believe so. Yet would she ache for him?”

Allegra seemed quite taken with Hannibal’s response, nodding in agreement.

Rinaldo Pazzi's attention remained on Will and Hannibal, contemplating, pondering his short-term discomfort of leaving Hannibal with his wife against his long-term goal of finally catching *Il Mostro* and being rewarded in a way his own precinct would never grant him.

Given his drive, ambition and stubbornness, it was not a hard choice to make.

"Signor Graham, may I speak to you for a moment?"

Without awaiting an answer he led them away a few feet, close enough to watch his wife in his peripheral vision, far enough to be out of earshot of Hannibal.

Will followed his prompt calmly, yet recoiled internally against the hand Pazzi had briefly placed upon his arm to steer him in the right direction.

“Signor Graham,” Pazzi said quietly, yet there was a sense of threat laid thinly buried in his voice. “It is not smart for a man in your condition to try and lure a dangerous criminal alone.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” Will returned calmly, yet void of emotions, keeping his voice from expelling the spite he truly felt, trying to play into whatever sympathies the inspector still had left for him.

Pazzi’s gaze lowered, only slightly, before he looked Will in the eyes again.

“That bite mark on your neck, Signor Graham. It is not smart for an omega to try and bait an alpha in the way you are doing. You could get seriously hurt in the process. Or worse.”

Will averted his gaze for a moment, wandering without aim among the crowd, shifting subtly from one leg to another to disperse the feelings of anger and insult, yet Pazzi seemed to interpret his avoidance of him and the spike in his scent as insecurity and anxiety.

“Let me help you.”

The expression in Pazzi's eyes had once again become hungry, relentless, like the last time Will had heard him talk about *Il Mostro*.

Will looked over to Hannibal, who was still engaged in friendly conversation with Allegra, then turned back to Pazzi.

“And you? Are you alone?”

“It is the only way in which I work this case, Signor Graham. Much like you, I prefer to deal with my demons on my own.”

Will hesitated for a moment, then allowed his expression to become more vulnerable, eyes distant, haunted almost.

If Pazzi saw in him the image of a defenceless, wounded omega, that was what he was going to give him.

Playing into his pride and instincts of protection, just to lure him in close enough to make him touchable.

Close enough to strike.

“He, uhm…" Will took a beat to find his voice, words only brought over his lips with great effort. "He works late nights at the library of the Capponi… Many times, he will be the only one left in that part of the building…”

The corners of Pazzi’s mouth twisted into a smile, eyes dark and full of hopeful vengeance. The ghost that had evaded him for the past twenty years now suddenly in his grasp, so close he could feel the satisfaction that would follow.

Satisfaction, and the reward for his work he kept in the shadows.

Pazzi reached out to Will, amicably squeezing his arm in a gesture that made Will grit his teeth. The trespassing, belittling gesture of an alpha with no respect for the personal boundaries of an unmated omega, vastly underestimating the danger beneath his skin.

“You are doing the right thing, Signor Graham. It would have been too dangerous for you alone. You do not have to compromise your safety any longer.”

Will nodded slightly, appearing defeated and tired, his gaze cast downward upon his glass, fidgeting with it until Pazzi had broken Allegra away from the alluring charms of the murderer he had been seeking for the past two decades of his life.

It was only when Hannibal caught up to Will and Pazzi and his wife had long disappeared in the crowd that Will awoke from his stupor, heat and anger rising underneath his skin.

"We need to talk about Pazzi."

Hannibal nodded calmly in agreement, his eyes, too, lingering upon the thinning crowd of people.

"Come with me. I know a place for us to clear our heads."

Chapter 18

Hannibal had driven them up the incline of the Oltrarno district, parking the car at the Piazzale Michelangelo.

When Will got out of the car the cool night breeze welcomed him, along with the panoramic view of the city, the imposing architectural builds of Giotto's Campanile and the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore towering over the very heart of the historical city centre.

At this hour there were no tourists, no vendors, no rush.

It was just Will and Hannibal, and the stars above their city, shining way above the artificial lights of the modern world below.

Will followed Hannibal to the edge of the platform, taking in the magnificent view that only belonged to them.

For a long time neither of them spoke, enjoying the scenery, until Will could no longer push aside the discomfort of the encounter at the opera.

"He thinks I am your victim…"

Hannibal could almost taste the sharp scent of hurt and offence on his tongue, yet it brought about a twisted sense of comfort along with it.

"It bothers you."

"*Yes*, it bothers me…" Will took a deep breath to not let out his anger on Hannibal. "I believe he thinks I… honey-trapped you, or something of the sort."

To Will's surprise, Hannibal began to laugh, shaking his head softly in disbelief.

"Well… You certainly would have succeeded with an approach like this a long time ago."

Will raised his brows at him.

"And now I don't?"

"Now…" Hannibal corrected, wrapping an arm around Will's waist, pressing a kiss to the base of his nape, "... I believe we have equally trapped each other."

Will smiled, yet still couldn't quite shake the anger.

"I was… used to people treating me differently because of my imagination. My work. My methods. It seemed easier, just flying under the radar, masking as a beta…"

"You do not have to mask for anyone anymore, Will. Our society has long passed the point of such associations and prejudices."

"Would you have still wooed me if I had been an alpha, then?"

Hannibal smirked softly.

"I took you for one. Once I had seen you come out of your shell and connect with your darkness, I believed you to be the same as I am. So, yes." Hannibal smiled softly, kissing him again. "I would have wanted you all the same."

Will let out a deep breath he had not realised he had been holding, feeling soothed by Hannibal's words and his touch.

"I still feel like… like the scales have not been balanced between us."

Hannibal gave his statement some thought.

"Because I hurt you."

"Because you *scarred* me," Will replied, yet there was no bitterness or resentment in his voice.

"Is that something you would like to do? Leave your mark on me?"

Hannibal tilted his head, watching his reaction.

"You did so, once. A long time ago."

Will sighed softly, more in an expression of regret than envy of the man who had nearly succeeded in killing Hannibal in his place.

"It wasn't really me… It wasn't my design…"

"Then we will find a way for you to show me. Show me your design, Will. Have me be a part of it."

A part of Will screamed at him how twisted and insane he sounded, wanting to hurt and scar the person who mattered most to him in the world, yet the voice echoed only in the deepest wells of his mind, unable to fully convince him.

"You would actually allow me to do that to you?"

Will narrowed his brows, turning slightly so he could look at Hannibal.

Hannibal smiled calmly, and there still lay affection in his features.

"You once said it yourself, I am a sadist, Will, not a masochist. I do not delight in the experience of pain, yet I find myself thinking that it would bring me pleasure all the same to witness this side of you. The side of you that craves blood, and flesh, and find me to be utterly yours."

“It sounds even more insane when you say it out loud…” Will chuckled slightly, leaning a bit more into Hannibal’s embrace.

“So long as we share it,” Hannibal mused, looking out over the city once more as silence fell over them.

Finally, it was Will who picked up the conversation again.

“I believe he is acting for a reward of some kind. Pazzi. You must still be among the FBI’s most wanted. It attracts attention, and not by the most law-abiding people.”

“There are, indeed, people whose lives I have touched that would possess the means to put a bounty on my head. An attractive sum, no doubt, for a man who was shunned by his own peers after finding that his case against me fell to pieces.”

“We need to be more careful…” Will murmured, and found Hannibal’s arms wrapped around him tighter.

“We will not live in fear, Will. Living in fear would be no life at all. Our freedom, our lives, our joy would be void at the prospect of an existence spent in the constant state of anxiety and paranoia.”

“So we do nothing?”

Hannibal smiled calmly at the slight edge in Will’s voice, tinted with worry that did not concern himself.

“We will be aware of our surroundings, like we always have been, you and I. Like we were tonight.”

Will nodded slightly, still not quite convinced.

He was sure that there would be patterns to follow, that someone like Jack or Alana could recreate them in the same way that he once had in order to find the Chesapeake Ripper.

Hannibal was still attracted to the arts, to fine dining and socialising with people in the fine arts communities.

No matter where they would go, there would always be a pattern to follow.

Breadcrumbs to pick by those brave enough to step closer to what lurked in the deep, dark forest.

This time, however, Hannibal would not await them in the darkness alone.

“I laid a trap for him… I figured it might be the best way to get to Pazzi alone…”

Hannibal shifted slightly, his interest piqued.

“What kind of trap?”

Will finally turned away from the view of the city below, leaning against the balustrade as he looked at Hannibal.

“I told him where to find you… That you were working late nights alone at the Capponi…”

Hannibal laid a hand upon Will’s cheek before pulling him into a long, soft kiss.

“I hunt. You lure. It seems we have found a way to combine our strong suits…”

Hannibal looked at Will for a moment, his thumb trailing the curve of his cheek bone.

“Will you join me, then? In catching him?”

Will looked back up at Hannibal, confidence in his gaze.

“Yes.”

Chapter 19

“Hannibal? Is something wrong?”

Hannibal looked up from his dinner, from the wine glass he had been holding onto as his mind had started to wander, back to the encounter he had had earlier that day at the Palazzo Capponi.

“No,” he offered calmly, finally setting down the glass after taking another sip. “Yet I have to discuss something with you, and I fear you may not like my opinion on the matter.”

Will shifted slightly in his seat, worry and anxiety creeping up inside of him.

“What is it…?” he asked as calmly as he could, more quietly than he had anticipated.

Hannibal looked up at him, his expression mild, yet eyes almost woeful as they met Will’s.

“I have changed my mind regarding our joint endeavour of going after the Chief Inspector. Pazzi has found me at my work today, at the exhibition I am currently setting up.”

“Yet you’re still here…,” Will concluded quietly.

“Exactly,” Hannibal replied, “If he had been working with the force of the Questura behind him, they would have gotten a warrant in less than half an hour. I believe this confirms that Rinaldo Pazzi has now taken to working outside of the law, and that he is planning to sell me.”

Will bit his cheek, angered at the situation Pazzi had brought upon Hannibal.

“So, what you are saying is, you do not want me to be a part of this because you fear my safety might be compromised as well…” Will scoffed quietly, smiling sadly. “Whatever happened to not living in fear, then?”

“I am not living in fear for you, Will,” Hannibal said sternly, “I am taking a calculated risk, and I would prefer it to have as few variables as possible, given how unpredictable Pazzi may be in his position outside of the restrictions of justice.”

Will looked down at his dinner, whatever was left of his morality shocked at him being upset for not being calculated into the murder of another man.

He stayed silent for a while, brewing, then forcing himself to calm down.

He exhaled softly, before finally finding Hannibal’s gaze again.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gotten defensive about this. Given your history with Pazzi…”

Will stalled himself, taking a sip of his wine.

“Perhaps it is better if you deal with him on your own. In your own way. I have meddled in the business of your past far enough already…”

“I do enjoy your company, Will. And your participation.” Hannibal smiled, accepting the peace offered to him in Will’s apology. “Perhaps a more suitable target. For the both of us.”

Will nodded.

“Just, uhm…” He swallowed dryly, trying not to sound too anxious, “Let me know in case you need help with anything. Anything at all.”

Hannibal smiled softly.

“I appreciate it, Will. I will keep it in mind. Only, however, if you will not worry about me.”

Will smiled calmly, watching Hannibal get up to pour them both some more wine.

“Someone should, don’t you think?”

Will gently reached out for the vest Hannibal wore, pulling him down into a kiss, gentle at first, then a little more longingly.

“At least you can be sure I will be here, waiting for you…”

Hannibal smiled, stealing another kiss from Will’s lips.

“And I will be sure to return.”

When Hannibal had left for the Capponi again after dinner, he had felt eager, almost excited, anticipating when Rinaldo Pazzi would return to face him.

As it turned out, Hannibal would not have to wait for another night to come.

The music Hannibal listened to, echoing from the high walls and ceilings of the room of the exhibition, was gently disrupted by another pair of feet, steps coming ever closer.

“Buonasera, Commendatore.”

Calmly Hannibal approached the Inspector, and he made a note of the way Pazzi’s eyes lingered on his hands, the knife and apple he held, a polished, sharp surface both to be weaponised in physical injury and exposure of a well-kept, but false identity.

“Buonasera, Dottore,” Pazzi greeted with the same politeness he had approached Hannibal with earlier that afternoon.

This time, however, his words were accompanied by a wooden chest carried in his arms, rather than the veiled accusations regarding the disappearance of Hannibal’s predecessor at the Palazzo.

“Given the nature of your exhibition and the contents of our last conversation, I brought something I thought you might like to see.”

Pazzi set down the chest on Hannibal’s desk, opening the latch and lid to reveal the object he had brought for Hannibal’s consideration.

“It was supposedly worn by Francesco de’ Pazzi when he met his end. My family’s guilt, cast in iron.”

Quietly he set down the heavy object on the table, and Hannibal could not have found him to have brought along a greater gift.

A fitting prop to complete the stage, set for Rinaldo Pazzi’s demise.

“A scold’s bridle.”

Hannibal let his eyes wander upon the mask structure, the iron thorn on the inside of the mouthpiece, meant to subdue the tongue of its unfortunate wearer.

“May I?”

“Of course.”

Hannibal could almost taste the disappointment Pazzi tried to hide as Hannibal clothed his hands in a pair of white gloves, not allowing for Pazzi to obtain an identifying fingerprint quite so soon.

Not unless Pazzi would fall for the bait he had laid out for him, metal, shiny and silver, resting next to the green apple on the table.

Carefully, yet with the assured confidence of a scholar, Hannibal lifted the medieval torture device to inspect it further, enjoying the sensation of observing a piece of history quite so closely.

“A wonderful heirloom,” Hannibal commented, honestly impressed with the craftsmanship of the specimen in his hands. “I am very glad that you have brought it here, Commendatore Pazzi.”

Then, just as carefully, he set the mask back down onto the table, passing Pazzi in a gesture so natural the Chief Inspector did not care to pay attention to him, his eyes fixated on the knife on the table.

“Yeah?”

It was all Pazzi could bring himself to say, trying to sound engaged and casual while his attention was entirely focused elsewhere, fingers shaking with adrenaline as he pulled out a cotton handkerchief and tried to grab the knife as quickly and quietly as possible while still preserving Hannibal’s fingerprint on it.

When Rinaldo Pazzi felt cloth pressed against his mouth and nose, a sweet, almost citrusy smell mixed with that of ether subduing his senses, he knew he should not have bothered. He should not have come, should not have left his wife that night, should not have engaged in a game outside the law with a man who had had decades of experience on him, and far, far less qualms about it…

When Rinaldo Pazzi awoke it was not only his senses that felt dulled and heavy but his entire head, weighed down heavily, the sweet taste of chloroform making way to a sharp, iron taste on his tongue.

Once he got his bearings about himself, panic overcame him like a gush of ice cold water, his limbs constricted and his body bound to a hand truck, his head caged in the very iron mask he had brought to specifically capture Hannibal’s attention and fingerprints.

Pazzi groaned with pain as he felt the iron thorns of the mouthpiece dig into his tongue with the slightest movement, rendering the mere thought of speaking or even screaming unbearable.

"The scold’s bridle was used as a device for public shaming and humiliation," Hannibal explained calmly as he stepped into view of Pazzi, opening the large window he had placed him in front of. "It tamed the feisty tongue of its wearer, while different shapes of masks were indicative of different types of unwanted transgressions."

When Hannibal finally looked at Pazzi again, his eyes were distant and cold, full of disdain for the man in front of him.

"I believe though its methodology may be long overhauled, it still remains a fitting punishment. Especially in cases of alphas like yourself, Commendatore, who are merely capable of perceiving a hollow beauty and fitness for breeding in the omegas around them."

Cold sweat lingered on Pazzi's skin as he watched Hannibal tie a noose out of a thick electrical cable, and weakly, he tried to resist his bindings.

"Isn't that how you thought of him? A pretty, sweet and slick honey trap to lure me in and capture me between his legs, robbing you of your opportunities of a plentiful bounty?" Hannibal's voice sounded sharper now, an aggressive growl rising in his chest at the thought of the rude insult Pazzi had dealt Will.

His Will.

Pazzi whined as the mouthpiece cut into his tongue as he tried to resist it, to argue, to beg for his life and for forgiveness if he had to.

Instead, he felt the cold, hard lining of the cable against his throat, the noose slowly tightened by Hannibal.

"So, tell me."

Hannibal's eyes found his once more, unimpressed by the stench of primal fear that soiled Pazzi's scent.

"Did you sell me? Blink once for yes, twice for no."

Pazzi closed his eyes slowly, blinking once, tears stinging in his eyes as he did.

Hannibal nodded, satisfied as he did not detect any signs of a lie in his response.

"Was it Mason Verger that you sold me to?"

Again, a slow, agonising blink in response.

"You've done very well in responding so truthfully, Commendatore," Hannibal said, an unnerving and unpredictable calmness to his words. "Perhaps I will not have your beautiful wife for dinner, after all."

Hannibal could not have cared less about Allegra, yet the shock and panic it instilled in Rinaldo made his threat all the sweeter.

He loosened Pazzi's restraints, then pulled a knife from his pocket, unfolding the blade.

"It is a shame I did not get to show you the woodcarving I discovered of your ancestor. Though, perhaps it will leave a more lasting impression on you, relating to his experience."

He raised the blade into Pazzi’s field of vision.

"Bowels out, then."

With a swift, quick movement Hannibal plunged the blade into Pazzi's stomach, pulling it down all the way across his abdomen, relishing the gurgled scream of pain and terror as Pazzi further impaled his tongue on the iron thorns, ripping himself apart in the same instance Hannibal did.

Hannibal watched as Pazzi fell to his death, the length of the cable pulling taught, his neck snapping under his weight as he caught himself in the fall. Organs spilled from his abdominal cavity, completing the long way down to the ground below Pazzi’s dangling feet.

Hannibal sighed, quietly bemoaning the restricted sight of the inner courtyard, and he could not help thinking how much more significant a display Pazzi could have had, hanging from the narrow balcony at the Palazzo Vecchio.

Then again, perhaps his secrecy and private shame had warranted just as much of an insignificant tableaux, with no one to gawk at but the people who would cut down his corpse.

Them, and Jack Crawford.

Chapter 20

The golden rays of dawn were slowly awakening the city of Florence when Hannibal finally returned home, his breathing still laboured, body aching from cuts and blows, blood drying on his skin.

Will had only managed to sleep lightly that night, worry and anticipation had kept him awake for the most part. He had practically jumped out of bed when he finally heard the front door, knowing in his gut that Hannibal's overly untimely return could only mean that he had already dealt with Rinaldo Pazzi that very night.

Against all reason and safety, Will had expected a call, maybe a text or some other form of note to let him know that Hannibal would be home late. What he hadn't expected was for Hannibal to return home in the manner he did.

"Oh my God, Hannibal…!"

Will quickly reached him by the door, eyes hastily scanning his body, trying to make out how much of the blood on his clothes and skin was actually Hannibal's.

Hannibal gently laid his hands on Will's wrists as he cupped his face, seeking his gaze.

His lower lip looked like it was burst and a trail of dried blood ran down his chin, small cuts all over one side of his face, reaching from his cheek bone up to his temple and forehead.

Up close Will could smell the fresh blood that was still seeping from a gash across Hannibal's chest, yet despite his roughed up appearance, Hannibal remained calmer than Will in this moment of perceived crisis.

"Don't worry. I'll be fine, Will," he promised softly, gently caressing Will's face, the fragrance of distress in the omega's scent hurting him more than any of his physical wounds.

"How can I help?" Will immediately replied, still deeply worried, resisting the urge to hold onto Hannibal tightly, protectively, even if it would hurt him even more.

Hannibal smiled calmly, gently combing his fingers through Will's soft, brown curls.

"I could use a hot bath… Maybe you can help me clean the wounds. There might be some on my back that need attention, and I would rather not miss a shard of glass in any of them."

Will nodded, swallowing down the questions that swirled in his head, gently guiding Hannibal into the bathroom, noticing the slight limp in his step.

Will turned on the water in the tub, letting it fill with hot water as he carefully helped Hannibal out of his clothes, trying to be mindful of the wounds he could not quite see yet.

His lips parted slightly, tears rising to his eyes as he began to grasp the full magnitude of Hannibal's injuries, large, dark bruises blooming on his skin, covering the side of his chest, his stomach and thighs, and a large portion of his back.

"What happened...?" Will finally asked quietly, just loud enough to be heard over the swirling, running water.

"I had subdued and killed Pazzi without incident," Hannibal explained calmly, stepping out of his clothes, "Yet I had not accounted for an encounter with Jack Crawford that same night."

Will's eyes widened slightly, the most honest expression of surprise and shock mirrored on his face.

"Jack is in Florence…?"

Hannibal only gave him a brief look and nodded, then carefully sank into the hot, comforting water of the tub.

"I'll go get the first aid kit…" Will murmured, more to himself than to Hannibal, before briefly disappearing from the bathroom.

When Will returned once more his gaze was more calm, focused, trying to only pay attention to his task at hand rather than the thoughts that began to spiral in his head.

"Can you lean forward a bit?" he asked softly, sitting by the bathtub to examine Hannibal more closely.

Will grabbed a sponge and cleaned the cuts on Hannibal's back as thoroughly and carefully as he could.

"They're not too deep. No more bleeding, as far as I can see. I think your clothes took the brunt of it…" he explained calmly, before gently washing Hannibal's back, then gesturing for him to lean back again. "Is this okay? Can you rest like this?"

"Yes," Hannibal replied truthfully, closing his eyes as Will focused his attention to the largest cut across the right side of his chest, cleaning it just as carefully, mindful of any objects that might still be located in his wounds.

"I never knew you knew how to stitch up a wound," Hannibal commented, the hint of a smile playing around the corners of his lips as he felt Will guide the needle and thread through his skin.

"Yeah, well… After I had healed enough to focus on reading, I figured I might as well adapt a few more useful skills that might come in handy for us…" Will mumbled softly.

Hannibal opened his eyes and looked up at him, smiling wider.

"Different from tying your lures, is it?"

Will chuckled quietly, but kept the motion of his hands stable and secure.

“Maybe all those hours of tying my own lures were good for something after all. It seems to serve you once again…”

Will shot Hannibal a brief look, both of them reminiscing to the method Hannibal had used to frame Will for his own crimes.

A point in time in their relationship that seemed to have taken place a lifetime ago.

“It does, indeed,” Hannibal agreed, finding Will to have done quite a good job for a medical layman.

After taking care of his most urgent wound, Will still kept to gently cleaning Hannibal’s skin, the warmth of the water merging with that of his touch, washing away the blood and violence that had stuck to him.

Will watched Hannibal closely, mindful not to hurt him more than necessary, yet he found himself distracted more often than not by the scent of the sweat that had clung to his skin, pheromones unlocking visions of aggression, of possessiveness and strength.

Will had never witnessed the true extent of Hannibal’s potential for violence as in the instances of his Ripper killings or that of Antony Dimmond, not in the moments it happened, only ever seeing afterimages of his power.

His gaze lingered on Hannibal’s naked skin, the subtle curves of his muscles as he trailed them with the sponge, becoming increasingly distracted.

“Jack is alive. In case you were wondering,” Hannibal noted, focused on the absent expression in Will’s gaze, the way his hands seemed to follow unconscious demands rather than conscious commands.

Will blinked softly, shifting in his seat, a hint of red high on his cheeks as he felt strangely caught, afraid Hannibal might have been able to read his mind somehow.

“I wasn’t… wasn’t thinking about that…” Will admitted quietly, looking back up into Hannibal’s eyes.

“Then what were you thinking about?” Hannibal inquired curiously. He reached for Will’s wrist once more, gently kissing his palm as he had let go of the sponge.

Will’s eyes followed Hannibal’s hand, lingering on his lips before returning his gaze again.

Even while objectively vulnerable, wounded and naked, Will could not help but think how much power and grace Hannibal exuded, dignity and strength effortlessly enveloping him like a second skin.

“I was thinking… that I never fully appreciated how strong you are… That I never truly witnessed you in the moments of your killings, only seeing my reenactments of your actions…”

Charming and lean, strong yet elegant. A perfect predator.

“It excites you,” Hannibal concluded, smirking slightly as the shade of red on Will’s cheeks grew a little more vibrant.

“Not sure if that’s the right word for it…” Will mumbled, falling silent again at the sensation of Hannibal’s lips pressed against his pulse at his wrist.

Will looked at him for a long, quiet moment, his own heartbeat quickening its pace at the intense expression in Hannibal’s eyes, the very way in which he seemed to look right through him, into the depths of his soul.

“I was thinking about how much I enjoy touching you…”

It was a quiet, yet honest confession, muttered in the aftermath of broken glass and dried blood, worries and comfort.

“So touch me,” Hannibal returned softly, placing another kiss to Will’s fingers before guiding his hand down to his chest, this time without the barrier of a sponge.

Hannibal’s invitation seemed like it was the most natural thought for him, a conclusion in consent that had been painfully obvious to him, yet had still remained an impenetrable barrier for Will.

Will’s eyes searched for Hannibal’s, hesitation and insecurity deep beneath the instinctual urges that had controlled Will’s thoughts until only a moment ago.

Hannibal smiled softly, encouragingly, very slowly guiding Will’s fingers down the uninjured side of his chest.

Before Hannibal could raise his other hand to him, Will leaned in closer instead, finding his lips in a soft, almost anxiously careful kiss, only daring to become more longing as Hannibal pressed his lips firmly against Will’s, proving his minor injury to be none of Will’s concern.

Will sighed softly against his lips, feeling a subtle thrill at the iron taste of blood, paired with the sensation of seeing and touching Hannibal so deliberately, free to explore and to observe as he wished.

“Mh…”

Will’s nails gently scratched over Hannibal’s skin as their kiss deepened, the remnants of pheromones he could taste on him almost too much to handle, too much to stay entirely sane while being in such close proximity to him.

He shifted slightly in his seat, allowing himself to be more comfortable, unashamedly present in the moment as he continued to slowly explore Hannibal’s body, savouring the feeling of his skin beneath his hands, christening the areas of his body with his touch that would only remain his to enjoy.

Slowly Will reached lower beneath the shallow surface, mindful of Hannibal's bruises as he touched his side, his abdomen, hesitating before going further.

Will gently parted from Hannibal's lips, his gaze seeking permission, yet once again he found himself encouraged by Hannibal's hand on his wrist, not demanding, merely approving of Will's unspoken request.

He leaned in closer once more, capturing Hannibal's lips in a kiss full of hunger and devotion, gentle yet longing in his manner as Will slowly reached between Hannibal's legs, enjoying trailing the curve of his hip bone with his fingers before he reached the soft, neatly trimmed pubic hair.

Will inhaled sharply, surrendering control over their kiss to Hannibal as his fingers grazed the base of his cock, already finding it to be swelling under his touch, ready to form a much bigger knot.

Hannibal let go of Will's wrist as he wrapped his fingers around his shaft, slowly exploring his length, and buried his hand in Will's curls instead, keeping him close.

Will stroked him slowly, savouring the sensation of feeling him grow to full erection despite the trauma his body had gone through earlier that night. He whimpered softly as Hannibal bit his lower lip, a reaction to Will rubbing his thumb over the tip of his cock, circling it firmly.

Will could hardly remember the last time he had been that intimate with an alpha, and in comparison the knotting tools he had tried few and far between over the years felt like an insult to both his own needs and the man in front of him, a tasteless copy that would hardly hold up in comparison to the real deal.

"Hannibal…"

Will moaned softly, feeling himself getting hard just being kissed, his pyjama pants wet with slick between his legs at how delicately Hannibal pulled at his curls, the sensation of slowly feeling his knot grow under his touch.

Will focused his attention more on the base, massaging him firmly for as long as he could reach his fingers around the girth of Hannibal's knot, eyes watering and hips twitching at the mere idea of feeling him inside as he grew further than Will could fully encompass with only one hand.

Will's cheeks burned as he felt and heard Hannibal moan against his lips, the sound and feeling of it shooting right between his legs, leaving him aching for Hannibal despite already touching him in the most intimate way he knew how.

Will closed his fist around his shaft once more, stroking him faster, harder, trying to alternate between paying attention to his tip and knot, the latter of which made Hannibal's hips twitch, thrusting into Will's hand.

The sound Hannibal made when he came echoed through Will's entire body, chills running down his spine at the low growl in the other man's chest, the sensation of Hannibal's knot hot

and heavy and pulsating in his hand enough to send Will over the edge only a moment later, coming entirely untouched in his pyjama pants.

Hannibal still didn't part from him, their kisses deep and slow, hot breaths mingling as they slowly calmed down, both as sensitive to each other's touch as a raw nerve, exhilarated and overstimulated.

Will still held onto Hannibal, keeping his hand around the knot at the base of his cock as best he could, firm and snug and comfortable as he kept spilling his seed steadily with every heartbeat, knot barely deflated by the time Will gathered his wits about him again.

Hannibal licked his lips, tongue lingering on the bruised and bloody part of it, grounding himself in the dull, throbbing ache of the freshly opened wound.

"I'm sorry… I shouldn't have-"

Will interrupted himself with a stifled whimper as Hannibal pulled at his curls just a little harder, stimulating him enough to make Will squirm in his seat, thighs throbbing with overstimulation.

"*Never* apologise to me, Will… Not for this. Not ever."

Hannibal's voice was low and rough, breathless and with a demanding growl to it, contrasting his touch on Will's cheek, the way he gently wiped away the spit from Will's red, swollen lips.

Hannibal shifted slightly and closed his eyes, getting just a little more comfortable in his position in the tub again as he gently let go of Will again, moaning softly with every little movement of the younger man's hand around his knot.

Will licked his lips and swallowed dryly, watching the sated, yet also deeply exhausted expression on Hannibal's face.

"Is this comfortable for you?"

Hannibal nodded, his eyelids feeling heavier as he looked back up at Will, smiling softly.

"Yes, thank you. The pressure is quite nice, yet I worry it might be a bit of a strain for you. It will take a while until it fully goes down again."

"I don't mind," Will reassured calmly, his smile slowly turning into a chuckle. "Perhaps a shower would have been better…"

Hannibal smiled, eyes closing once more with exhaustion, yet unable to fully rest, the sweet, alluring scent of the omega so close to him simply too enticing to fully disregard his instincts.

"I believe we could both use one. If you wouldn't mind," he added gently, looking back up at Will.

Will nodded softly, using his free hand to reach for Hannibal's, kissing the back of his finger's like he had done with him before, affection and unspoken love in his gaze.

"Right now, you take as much time as you need. Then we'll get cleaned up and get you to bed…"

Chapter 21

Warm rays of mid-day sunshine woke Will up several hours later, illuminating Hannibal's bedroom through half-drawn curtains, and he was glad to find Hannibal still resting peacefully beside him.

His face looked relaxed, unburdened by sorrows or pain, only the small cuts on his face still speaking of the events of last night.

Will gently extended his hand, carefully brushing a strand of hair out of Hannibal's face, and found Hannibal's gaze to be surprisingly awake and alert as he looked at him.

"Good morning, Will."

"Good morning…" Will replied softly, voice still a little raspy. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore," Hannibal replied truthfully, "Yet not overly so. I don't believe any bones were injured too badly, so my bruises are merely a small discomfort…"

Will looked down to the cut across the right side of Hannibal's chest, the gash he had stitched up still hidden underneath the bandage he had applied earlier that night after their shower.

Hannibal gently placed his hand on Will's hip and leaned in closer, kissing him slowly and softly, enjoying the peaceful moment between them.

It was Will who pulled back eventually, looking up at him.

"What happened last night, Hannibal?"

Hannibal smiled calmly, placing a kiss onto the back of Will's hand before he began to explain.

For a while, they talked about Rinaldo Pazzi, about the exhibition, about Jack Crawford and his late wife.

Hannibal spoke of blood, of broken glass and his former patient Mason Verger, and Will lay and listened quietly, trying to put off reality for a moment longer, pretending that they would forever remain safe and untouchable, just as comfortable as they were now in the bed they shared.

"They will come looking for you," Will eventually said, quietly disturbing the peace he had sought to prolong as much as possible. "If they know you were the last to be at the library, preparing the exhibition, and if Jack corresponds with them…"

Will's thoughts trailed off, and he felt his heart sink.

For nearly a year, they had lived in peace and quiet, flying well under the radar of the authorities, and now that Hannibal and he had finally grown closer, allowing feelings of

affection to prevail over those of distrust and hurt, it would all be over soon.

“They will come, yes,” Hannibal confirmed, “As soon as they have secured the source that Rinaldo Pazzi had, they will be eager to succeed where he failed in gaining the reward Mason Verger promises.”

“We should get out of town. Disappear, before they can regroup.”

Hannibal smiled mildly, not as hurried, not as reactive as Will was in his ways.

“We will do so when the time is right. I believe before that can happen, we will have one last, final guest to welcome in this home.”

Will lowered his gaze.

“You mean Jack…”

Hannibal’s voice remained just as calm, yet it was palpable to Will that he had grown more distant to the man they had both once known, the man they may have once considered a friend.

“I will not ask anything of you regarding this matter, Will. Yet I believe that we are both well aware that there are only so many options available to us at this point.”

Hannibal gently placed his hand on Will’s cheek, caressing it softly.

“Observe or participate. It will be the choice you have to make.”

Will nodded softly, closing his eyes.

Just a little longer.

Just a little more time with Hannibal, a little more opportunity to forget about the rest of the world.

To forget about the fork in the road that lay ahead of him.

Despite his worries about possibly encountering Jack or the police, Will had decided to go out for a walk as soon as the sun had set, needing to move, to expel some of the anxious feelings inside of him.

He had not ventured too far, yet he had taken mostly roads unfavoured by tourists, except for one that led him right into the very heart of Florence, close to the Duomo.

Given how events hand played out, he figured Hannibal deserved just as much of a parting gift for Florence, the city he had favoured ever since he was a young man.

It was not too long after his visit to Vera Dal when Will quietly closed and locked the apartment door behind himself, taking the shopping bag with him into the kitchen to open the wine and store the truffles.

With two wine glasses in hand he finally made his way into the living room, finding Hannibal sketching by the fireplace.

Hannibal smiled at him as he recognised the familiar vintage of Bâtard-Montrachet, gladly accepting the glass Will offered to him.

“You went shopping,” Hannibal noted, putting aside his sketchbook as Will sat beside him on the sofa.

“I felt like it might be a nice way to commemorate the last peaceful evening we may have here…”

Hannibal seemed to be lost in thoughts and memories for a moment. Then, he smiled and gently touched glasses with Will.

“To Florence, then.”

“To Florence,” Will agreed, taking a sip of his wine, watching the flames dance across the dry logs of wood in the fireplace as he reminisced about the places they had gone, the talks they had had, the memories and experiences they had shared.

“Given how we came to be here… I never would have expected us to leave in circumstances that are so far removed from our beginnings…”

“I would have to disagree. We often find our end in our beginnings,” Hannibal replied, taking in the view of Will beside him, cheeks lightly flushed, a glass of wine in his hand and an aura of clear, unsubdued pheromones around him, his scent so vibrant and lovely, echoing the depths of his soul.

“In Baltimore, we both lost and found each other. Chose each other, yet without being prepared for the consequences of that choice. Now, we are.”

Will smiled slightly, looking down at his wine, remembering the night he had felt Hannibal’s painful embrace for the first time.

“Would you do it again? Choose me?”

Hannibal smiled softly, gently running his hand through Will’s hair, his hand lingering on his nape in a warm, soothing touch.

“If I were destined to meet you, in every different life I may live, Will, I would always choose you.”

Will looked into Hannibal’s eyes, calmed by his reassurance, the firm gentleness in his voice.

“I believe I would, too…”

Will moved in a little closer, now seated right next to Hannibal, thighs gently touching as he leaned in to kiss him, tasting white wine and affection on his lips.

“Did you believe you could change me, Will?”

Will chuckled softly, amused at how someone as observant and self-aware as Hannibal could be blind to his most obvious traits.

“I already did…”

Hannibal didn’t reply, simply allowing himself to be pulled into another kiss, savouring the touch of their lips, the way Will pulled him in closer, needy and longing, while still being mindful of his wounds.

“Have you been feeling okay today, Will?”

It was a simple enough question, yet Will felt it was impossible to answer without feeling overwhelmed by emotions, fighting not to let his instincts get the better of him.

“It feels like a cruel joke…” he explained quietly, leaning his head against Hannibal’s shoulder, “All this time we’ve spent here, and now that I know that we will have to leave sooner or later… I keep feeling like I’m itching to be nesting right now… To curl myself up in bed, in pillows and sheets and the illusion of safety, like our world isn’t about to change…”

Hannibal smiled calmly, placing a kiss onto Will’s hair.

“It could be a method of coping with the stress of change for you, Will, not just the instinctual habits of your body. Why would you deny yourself something that could quite positively aid in soothing you?”

Will raised his head, his eyes hesitantly finding Hannibal’s again.

“Because I feel like… once I commit to it, I won’t be able to think clearly enough to let you go again…”

Hannibal quietly regarded him for a long moment, wondering if the intensity of his scent had not only changed due to the absence of suppressants, but also the harbinger of heat, making itself known to him more clearly.

"We are merely leaving this city behind, Will. Not each other. This is not goodbye, nor a final chance to take hastily for lack of a better opportunity…"

Will had emptied his wine glass and put it aside, his hand now resting on Hannibal's thigh.

“I know,” Will replied softly, gently caressing his thigh, “And I don’t want to rush any of this. I’d rather savour it for as long as I can…”

Hannibal gently reached out to him, pulling him into a soft, loving kiss.

Will shifted slightly in his seat, allowing himself to get lost in the comfort of his touch.

Knowing how it felt, kissing and touching Hannibal, he could barely recall how it had ever been so easy for him to resist his presence, to pull away when everything inside of him had ached to move only closer.

Will enjoyed the sensation of their lips touching, scents mingling, hands seeking to hold one another like the rest of the world had paused around them. It was only when Hannibal slowly let his hand wander down Will's side that Will dared to move, closer to his body, feeling the heat radiating off of him.

Guided by Hannibal's hands on his hips Will moved in closer still, straddling his lap, hands buried in Hannibal's hair as he kissed him back just as longingly, desperate to feel his touch.

Hannibal gently biting at his lower lip, tongue seeking his own was all it took for Will to feel heat rise under his skin, pooling in his groin, a familiar wet sensation slowly dampening his underwear in the confinement of his jeans.

Every time they touched felt more intense than the last, his body increasingly aching for the unmated alpha right in front of him, begging Will silently to finally take what he knew was his.

Gently Will brought some distance between them, forehead leaned against Hannibal's as he kept his eyes closed, trying to gather his wits about him.

"Is something wrong?" Hannibal asked softly, hands soothingly running over Will's back.

"No…" Will replied quietly, swallowing dryly. "I just… I feel like I'm on the edge of a cliff… Not sure whether to push myself over quite yet…"

"It is not the sensation of falling that we fear," Hannibal smiled, "but the landing."

Will chuckled, opening his eyes to look at Hannibal once more, almost overwhelmed by the adoration and reassurance he found in his gaze.

"You wouldn't push me, would you?"

"I would certainly do no such thing," Hannibal mused, entertaining his metaphor, "Yet I would gladly allow myself to be pulled along with you."

Will wrapped his arms around Hannibal's shoulders, burying his face at the crook of his neck.

"Thank you…"

Hannibal felt his whisper more than he heard it, the sensation of Will's warm breath against his skin causing a brief chill to run down his spine. He turned his head, gently placing a kiss onto Will's hair, holding onto him for as long as his aching body would let him.

"I have not thanked you yet for your kind assistance in bathing me last night. Would you like me to return the favour?"

Will felt Hannibal's hands gently run up and down his thighs, and if it had been anybody else, he would have felt quite exposed for how telling his own body reacted to Hannibal. Instead, he felt safe, both with how Hannibal would respond, as well as expressing himself and his needs.

"I don't think we should keep score of that…" Will chuckled, raising his head to place a firm kiss to Hannibal's lips. "I'll go get us some more wine…"

With that, he carefully crawled off of Hannibal's lap and returned to the kitchen, fetching the decanted wine he had opened earlier.

Perhaps they would not sleep that night either, kissing and talking, enjoying each other's company in silence, and maybe that was just as worthy of a goodbye as they needed.

Chapter 22

Night had fallen over Florence when Jack Crawford left the constant buzzing of the crowd of people behind him, his steps calm and confident as he set foot into the apartment building, entering the lift.

The ride upstairs seemed endless yet too short all at once, and he exhaled slowly as the small cage came to a halt, doors opening before him. He exited and crossed the final barrier, stepping into his future rather than returning to an alternate reality of his past.

For a moment, he listened closely as he stood before the apartment door, quietly drawing his gun, yet no voices or footsteps were to be heard from inside.

He placed his hand on the door handle, expecting resistance, yet it opened easily, unlocked, awaiting him and beckoning him inside.

When Jack set foot into the apartment his path was dark, light bulbs of the hallway reduced to the bare minimum of light they could offer without plunging him into complete darkness, the eerie feeling of the deep, echoing loneliness within a cave coming to his mind.

Music played softly from somewhere in the distance of the rooms he could not see, the same classical pieces he recognised from back in Baltimore, and a shudder overcame him at the memories of sitting with Hannibal Lecter, enjoying the company of a monster.

Slowly Jack approached the dining area at the end of the hallway, the large, open space, threatening him with blinding, unpredictable darkness.

Only a few candles allowed him to see the dining table properly, as well as the stringed musical instrument situated at its centre, plentiful fruits and food arranged around it, an altar in honour of the alluring power of its centrepiece.

It was a lyre, proudly displayed as it stood illuminated by the only other sources of light in the apartment, its dark, wooden body shining, reflecting the flickering lights of the candles, adorned with carvings of olive branches at the bottom. Their form, curving along the base, brought about the strong association of antlers, and Jack felt bile rise at the back of his throat at the memory of the antler room of Garret Jacob Hobbs.

Immediately Jack raised his gun as he heard slow footsteps approaching him from the darkness, eyes still trying to adjust to the dim light after having been bathed in the bright fluorescence of the lift.

“Hello, Jack.”

Jack felt his heart sink at the sound of the familiar voice, a voice he had believed to have gone eternally quiet at the hands of the Chesapeake Ripper a long time ago.

“Will…”

Jack lowered his gun, face mirroring his feelings of disbelief as Will Graham stepped closer, the air around him heavy with the scent of fever and illness.

“You’re alive…”

Will smiled, and it seemed tight, the joy of the gesture not reaching his eyes.

“So are you…”

Jack gathered his wits about him quickly, adjusting his posture, anger overcoming him once more at the apparently bad health of the man in front of him.

“Where is he, Will? Is he here?”

Will looked broken, breathing laboured, eyes dull and unfocused as he looked at Jack, shaking his head slowly, lowering it in surrender.

“You need to get out of here, Jack. Go, while you still can…”

Jack swallowed dryly, his mind conjuring up images of terrible violence, physical and psychological, inflicted by the Chesapeake Ripper against the backdrop of flashing lights and chamber music. Violence brought upon a man, a teacher who had once been too frightened by his own imagination to even consider hurting another person, corrupting him beyond recognition.

Despite his well-executed composure, reason and justice prevailing over his emotions, Jack could not help but be affected by the distress radiating off of Will, his scent and pheromones now tangible to him for the first time ever. Their intensity was overwhelming, making it harder for Jack to stay as objective and calm as he needed to be, a deep sense of anger and protectiveness tugging at the instincts buried beyond his grief.

“What happened to you, Will? Were you here in Florence, all this time?”

“I…” Will seemed to search in his mind for the right words to say, grasping at images of memories that eluded him. “I don’t know… I’m not sure…”

“We need to leave,” Jack replied firmly, “Right now. Do you know where he is, Will?”

Jack approached Will, laying a hand upon his arm, and his touch grazed the very scar he had dealt Will years ago in the kitchen of the Hobbs family, hidden underneath the fabric of Will’s shirt.

“Do you know where Hannibal is, Will?” Jack repeated, more urgently this time.

Will’s gaze wandered aimlessly over the tableaux on the dinner table, the sound of the lyre playing behind his eyes, serenading him.

“Why are you looking for him, Jack?” Will replied quietly, “What are you planning to do, once you find him?”

“I will make sure that he won’t hurt another person ever again,” Jack replied, words firm with determination.

“And what about the people he hurt because of you, Jack?”

Will’s eyes focused for the first time in the sparse light, looking directly at Jack.

“What about people like Miriam Lass? What about me? Did it ever occur to you to look for me in all these months…?”

Jack took a moment to reply, and when he did, his voice was much softer than before, the burden of regret and failure heavy upon them.

“There was so much blood, Will… I was sure you were dead…”

“Just like you were sure that I was the Chesapeake Ripper, because it was the reality Hannibal wanted you to believe,” Will replied more firmly, a hint of slight carrying his words in the space between them. “I survived living with him for *months* because I engaged in that reality. Do not fool yourself to think that he is not entirely in control of what is happening, Jack…”

“And what kind of reality would this be, then?” Jack nodded to the festively decorated table, taking a moment to inspect it more closely.

“It is a choice.”

Will looked at the proudly presented lyre, throning on the table.

“Like Orpheus had upon his ascent out of the Underworld in his effort to rescue Eurydice. You can choose to walk away, Jack.”

Will looked back at Jack, his gaze firm and almost pleading in its urgency.

“You can walk away from this. From your guilt and your involvement with me, from Hannibal Lecter, from the Chesapeake Ripper… *all of it*. Turn around, and don’t ever look back on it.”

“And what if I can’t do that? What if I refuse to let this go?”

Will smiled painfully.

“Then you will never escape this, Jack. No matter how good your intentions are, it will be the end of you…”

“So I leave you behind again? That’s his deal? Surrender you to him?”

Will lowered his gaze, avoiding his eyes.

“You did so before, Jack. He deems it will be easy for you to do so again…”

Jack's jaw clenched with anger as he nodded, insult added to an injury that he felt would never truly heal.

"And what if I don't? What if I refuse to play his mind games, and take you with me?"

"Then you obviously still have not understood him, Jack…" Will replied quietly, the knife slipping easily from his pocket, quiet and hidden in the darkness as he approached Jack, circled him, drawing in ever closer.

Jack let out a scream of agony as Will plunged the knife into his left shoulder, cutting through the muscles right where his bone sat above his arm.

Will kicked the gun across the room as soon as it had clattered to the floor, slipping from Jack's grasp.

As Jack turned around to reach him, Will pulled the knife out of his arm, hand darting out to Jack's neck, knocking the wind out of him as Jack threw a punch at him with his non-dominant hand, pain exploding in Will's face, the abrasion on his cheek throbbing with pain as he felt the blood against his skin.

Will staggered back, observing Jack who was still wheezing, trying to catch his breath after the trauma to his windpipe.

All Will could think of, all he could see at that moment in his mind's eye was the wounds and cuts Hannibal had sustained after merely one fight with Jack; the harm he had done. The way he would not hold back on Will, either, as soon as he had gathered his wits about him.

Down.

He needed him *down*.

Within an instant Will was right in front of him, ready to plunge the knife back into his body, yet found his swing immediately blocked by Jack, his fist coming down hard against Will's ribs instead.

Will groaned with pain, knife nearly slipping from his grasp, his aim not as well-positioned as before as he came at Jack, the knife slicing the side of his abdomen rather than burying itself beneath the skin and muscles, spraying them both with blood, filling the air between them with the heavy scent of iron.

In the near complete darkness, Will felt almost transfixed by the sight; not for the horrors he committed, but for the fact how incredibly dark the blood looked in the sparse candlelight, thick and black and glistening against their clothes.

Something about the sight, about the smell of it unlocked doors buried deep within his mind; doors that carried beyond them the tableaus of horror, of Hannibal, of the Chesapeake Ripper, of his own design.

The blood of Garett Jacob Hobbs that had sprayed against his skin, christening him in the unholy reality of his own becoming.

Blood that now mixed with the heightened state of his own arousal and adrenaline, his own pheromones, the fever of his suppressed heat boiling right beneath his skin, all now centred around the destruction of the alpha in front of him.

Before Will could block him or escape his grasp, Jack had tackled him to the floor, Will's back and head colliding hard with the wood beneath, momentarily disorienting Will to a point that he barely felt the pain of the punches thrown at him, blood spurting from his mouth, coating Jack's face, his arms and hands in ways that were no longer just figuratively in Will's blood.

Will's fingers tightened around the grip of his knife, fingers barely holding onto it as he gathered the rage and aggression he felt, the deep, instinctual urges to not only survive, but to fight against the mere idea of the alpha on top of him, overpowering him, disrupting the path he had chosen for himself, and for Hannibal.

Jack screamed in agony as Will punched the knife into his abdomen, using so much force that his grasp slipped, thrust towards the blade of the knife, cutting his fingers in the act.

Immediately as Jack backed off enough for Will to move, he pushed himself upright, manoeuvring his legs to kick Jack off him, his blood wet and hot as it soaked his clothes, making them stick to his heated, sensitive skin.

Finally, Will had overpowered Jack enough to straddle him, knees immobilising him like Will had done with the Firefly Man moments before his rebirth.

Jack wheezed underneath him, groaning hoarsely as Will repositioned his right knee, applying intense pressure to the stab wound high on his arm as he leaned his weight into it.

Will could smell the remnants of the strong bleach and chemicals the crime scene cleaners had used in the kitchen of Garret Jacob Hobbs, and he could smell the blood of the man he had shot and killed in a frenzy, now mixing with his own, seeping from the gunshot wound Jack had dealt him all those years ago.

"You don't have to do this, Will-..." Jack wheezed, anger and pain distorting the usually calm features of his face. "Hannibal Lecter is a dangerous psychopath, and a sadist, Will. He delights in your distress-... You, humouring him all this time- does nothing but enable him-...in his destructive ways-"

Will smiled breathlessly, yet it did not fully reach his eyes, the heat of agitation and resigned, hopeless amusement vibrant on his cheeks.

"There are means of influence other than violence, Jack… But violence is what you understand, isn't it? It's why you can't let the Ripper go…"

Will took a moment to carefully observe the man underneath him as he gathered his own wits about him again, inhaling the iron scent of his life with every breath of the air between them, gone the so carefully constructed mask of weakness and submission.

“Since you seemed to dedicate as much to the search for me as you did for Miriam Lass… I suppose this is quite fitting, then," he added quietly, briefly looking back to the lyre that throned above their scene of mutual destruction. "We are nothing but ghosts, grasping at you from the rivers of the Underworld in which you left us. Yet you will always want to turn around, won’t you? You will always do what you deem is fair and just, never what you were told, even if that is to save your life…”

When Will looked back down at Jack, the face of his friend had become entirely unrecognisable to Jack. Will’s eyes were dark not only with the glow of fever, but with hunger, the destructive famine of insanity, depths Jack would have never hoped to see on Will in his wildest dreams.

Only in his nightmares, he had.

Nightmares in which Will had never quite fought himself back out of the darkness.

Nightmares which had become reality.

"This is not Hannibal’s design, Jack…" Will explained quietly with an eerie sense of calm to his voice, fever shining on his skin amidst his bruises and blood, glowing in his eyes. "It's *mine*…"

Jack closed his eyes for a moment, denying Will the satisfaction of seeing how much it hurt to have failed not only his dying wife, but one of the few people he had ever let close to him.

To have lost not only love, but the hope he had so desperately tried to see even in the most fragile and unique of minds, even now trying to convince himself that Will had acted upon the behest of Hannibal Lecter, not his own volition.

When Jack looked back up at Will, meeting his eyes one last time, an expression of disappointment and sadness lay deep within them.

A painful disillusionment.

A final insult to the past they shared.

"I should've never pulled you out of that classroom…"

Will paused, freezing in his motions, caught entirely off-guard by Jack's words, the honesty and pain of regret in his voice.

The conviction that had allowed him to guide his knife with ease now threatened to leave him, hand trembling as he held onto it.

Doubt.

The same fatal mistake, forever paid forward between the two men.

Jack could see the overwhelm, the signs of instability and overstimulation return to Will.

He knew that as skilled as Will was in his law enforcement training, Jack had enough skill and strength to overpower him even now, beaten and bleeding, much like he had nearly ended the life of Hannibal Lecter on two separate occasions.

Jack felt the absence of the gold band on his ring finger, and he felt the weight he had carried with him ever since the first Ripper killings under his jurisdiction. Ever since the disappearance of Miriam Lass. Ever since the first signs of mental instability in Will Graham.

Jack knew he could still put up a fight. He knew whatever he would do to Will, he could call it self-defence and be done with it in the eyes of others.

Yet another part of him, the part that had surrendered his fate as soon as he had stepped into the building, did not *want* to.

Quietly, he raised his voice, a calm sense of stability returned to it despite the strain the attack had put on it.

"Will you make it quick?"

Finally, Jack had made his choice.

And he had chosen to surrender.

Will exhaled deeply, feeling like the air was pressed out of his lungs with the conflicting emotions fighting inside of him.

But Will, too, had made his choice, and he had chosen Hannibal.

He couldn’t let Jack go.

No matter how many alternate versions of events he saw playing out in his head, there simply was none in which Hannibal would not forever remain a final target to Jack, whether within the bounds of the FBI or on his own accord.

If he were to leave his past behind for good, and step into the unknown of the future with Hannibal by his side, there was no room for the relentless prosecution of a man who had once relied on both of them, now turned against them at the revelation of their true natures.

Will *couldn't*.

"Yes-..."

A quiet promise between them, uttered as a final act of courtesy, sealed in hot, salty tears and the swift, merciful blade of Will's knife, tearing apart the heartstrings that would no longer play to the melodies of their past.

-

Hannibal quietly observed as Will laid Jack's hands to rest on the lyre, his body peacefully composed, resting on the table between the plentiful fruits and flowers in a fresh, clean suit.

"You hesitated."

Will rounded the table, making sure everything was to his liking.

A memorial, rather than a tableau. A final goodbye to the man in front of him, as well as the past he had reminisced over in the past months, holding onto them like a line of safety. A net, becoming obsolete by the choices he had made.

"I did," he replied just as calmly, making sure the ancient coin was placed securely in Jack's mouth, sealing the peace he wished upon him, even if it had been him who had caused his violent end.

"Because you wanted to let him go?"

Will quietly shook his head, stepping away from the table.

"Because a part of me still hung onto the life I lived before you. But… I knew I had to let it go, to be with you…"

Hannibal gently took Will's hand into his own, raising it and gently placing a kiss upon Will's bandaged fingers.

He could feel the heat sitting right beneath his skin, the pheromones that radiated off of Will, heightening his emotions, the burden he felt looking at the body before them.

"Would you like me to leave you alone for a moment?"

"No," Will replied calmly, still holding onto Hannibal's hand.

It felt soothing, holding him, like it could keep the fire inside of him at bay.

Containing him like an oil spill.

"You said, Bella had passed," Will muttered quietly, eyes resting on the lyre.

"Yes," Hannibal confirmed, his own gaze resting upon the very spot where Will had murdered Jack, the floor now returned to its prior immaculate state.

A part of him despised the fact that Will had not allowed him to take part in the killing, not granted him the opportunity to take his share from the body before them, yet it was easy to honour Will's tableau. To witness the choices he had made, not only for their safety, but standing firm in the execution of his own design, too.

"I hope he finds peace, reuniting with her," Will nodded, the sound of the strings of the lyre playing in his mind, a slow and soothing melody.

“You intended for her to be his Eurydice in this scene, didn’t you?”

Will smiled as Hannibal formed the question he obviously knew the answer to.

“Of course, I did… You and I, I believe we were never destined to leave the Underworld again. Do you?”

Hannibal smiled at him, seeing where their characters fit into Will’s interpretations of the mythical worlds of ancient gods and heroes, his eyes briefly lingering on the bright pink, shiny seeds of the pomegranates on the table.

“Only in the spring, perhaps,” he agreed, “Yet I believe there may still be worse fates to be subjected to.”

Will looked at Hannibal, eyes dark and shimmering with the heat slowly taking over his body and mind, his hand holding onto Hannibal’s tighter despite the pain in his fingers, seeking his support as he felt his strength leave his body.

“I hope there will be many more opportunities for us to figure it out, too…”

Chapter 23

“Will? Shall we?”

Will let his gaze wander over the piazza, void of people at this late hour of the night. One final look at the church of Santa Maria Novella. One final look at the view he had come to associate with his home.

“Yes,” Will finally replied, smiling softly as he met Hannibal’s gaze across the roof of the car.

With legs that still felt increasingly weak, body aching in his attempt to further ignore the symptoms of his heat and the fresh injuries he had endured. Will sank into the passenger seat and closed his eyes, letting the stream of night air cool his skin through the open window as Hannibal drove them out of the city of Florence.

At a traffic light at the outskirts of town Hannibal paused, giving Will a long, thorough look through the eyes of both his partner and a medical professional, the way Will had kept carefully treating his injured face with a small ice pack throughout their drive not having evaded his capture.

“Are you sure you’re in good enough condition to travel tonight, Will? It will take several hours until we reach the nearest airport safe enough for our purposes.”

Will stared ahead into the darkness of the empty road before them. His mouth felt dry and he licked his lips, the taste of iron still lingering on his tongue, cheeks flushed and hot with the fever he carried, brought about by the attempt to suppress his instincts, no matter how much he tried to cool himself off.

Finally, he looked at Hannibal, and when he met the gaze of his amber eyes, smelled the pheromones of an impending rut on the unmated alpha beside him, he knew there was no way he could possibly hold out much longer, the pain and discomfort of his suppressed heat blocking out that of the wounds he had sustained entirely.

“No…” Will replied truthfully, closing his eyes at the soothing touch of Hannibal’s hand on his thigh, easing the sharpest edge of the pain right underneath his skin.

“I know a place where we could stay tonight, possibly even a few days, at most. It’s about two hours away from here.”

Will nodded weakly, trying to relax, focusing on his breathing, Hannibal’s touch, the fresh air on his skin.

“I can do two hours…”

Will did not remember falling asleep, yet he must have dozed off or lost consciousness a couple of times during their journey, feeling like he had lost time, their arrival announced to him only by the gesture in which Hannibal gently retracted his hand from his thigh.

“We’re here.”

Hannibal’s voice was soft and smooth, ease and calm radiating off of him in a way that Will’s mind desperately clung onto; adapting to his mood, his state of mind, keeping himself level-headed and on his feet for a little longer.

It was a small and old, yet beautiful villa that Hannibal led Will to, opening the door for him with a gesture so natural it felt like they had returned to this house after being only away for a day, returning to their welcoming home.

Will vaguely registered the tile floor beneath his feet, the cloaks that veiled most large pieces of furniture as they entered.

Hannibal brought their bags inside, carrying them up a small flight of stairs to the bedroom where he took a few extra minutes to lay down some fresh sheets for them, as well as towels in the bathroom, before he returned to Will downstairs.

“Will? Are you coming?”

Will took a deep breath, supporting himself against the entry door, finally meeting Hannibal’s eyes again.

Instead of replying, Will reached out to him, pulling him closer, uniting their lips in a deep and slow kiss that felt like it had been overdue ever since Jack had entered their apartment in Florence.

Hannibal obliged, returning Will’s kiss in the same manner as the hands of the omega impatiently roamed his body, fingers clenching in the fabric of his shirt, his mind entirely blocking out the sharp sting in his cut, bandaged fingers as he did.

“Bedroom’s upstairs…?” Will asked quietly, voice nearly breaking with how hoarse it was, hands trembling as he held onto Hannibal for dear life, heat finally taking over his body.

“Yes,” Hannibal smiled calmly, yet there was hunger in his eyes, possessiveness to his touch as he pulled Will in closer, taking him up into his arms. “I’ll take you there.”

Will barely gave Hannibal enough time to make it into the room, impatiently clawing at the shirt he was wearing.

Too many barriers between them, too many clothes, too much fabric, too much-

“Will.”

Will’s eyes were dark and sparkling with intensity as Hannibal gently held onto his wrists, forcing him to calm down.

“You can slow down, just a little. You will be okay. I will take care of you…”

Will felt a shiver run down his spine at Hannibal’s words, realisation finally sinking in that Hannibal was still with him. The man, the alpha he desired, was still with him. He would not have to suffer any pain, any more unbearable heat, any more nightmares that left him aching and unfulfilled. He would finally belong, and he would be mated.

Will forced himself to exhale deeply, expelling some of the fog in his mind, forehead resting against Hannibal’s shoulder as the other man gently laid a hand on the back of his neck.

“As much as I appreciate your enthusiasm, Will…” Hannibal gently filled the silence between them, “I would rather make sure you can be aware of what is happening right now… Are you with me?”

“Yes,” Will replied quietly, biting back a sob at how desperately he felt his insides twist and clench, tears rising to his eyes with how uselessly empty he felt.

Everything inside of him demanded and screamed for Hannibal; he barely had the wherewithal to understand how Hannibal was not affected just as badly as him.

“Will…” Hannibal repeated softly, gently tilting Will’s chin so he would look at him. “Do you trust me?”

The magnitude of Hannibal’s words sank into Will’s gut like a block of ice, leaving him with a moment of absolute clarity.

After all they had said and done, everything they had experienced and dealt each other, it was still Hannibal.

Hannibal, who had made him see who he truly was.

Hannibal, who had allowed him to reach the deepest, darkest corners of his mind, fulfilling the potential Will would have never allowed himself to without fear or judgement.

Hannibal, who loved him and trusted him with his life.

Hannibal, who would be his first.

“Yes,” Will replied quietly, yet a little more firmly, with as much conviction as he could muster in that moment. “I love you, Hannibal… And I trust you…”

Hannibal smiled, gently laying his hand upon Will’s uninjured cheek, placing a sweet, almost chaste kiss to his lips, only gradually allowing the touch of their lips to become more longing, more intense, more heated.

Will moaned softly as he felt Hannibal’s teeth gently tug at his bottom lip, tongues brushing against each other as Hannibal finally allowed Will to busy himself with the buttons of his shirt.

A sigh of both arousal and relief left Will's lips as he felt Hannibal's naked skin underneath his fingers at last, hands slowly exploring his shoulders and chest, abdomen and sides.

Hannibal let Will push the shirt off his shoulders, fabric gently rustling as it fell to the floor, left behind by them as Hannibal carefully manoeuvred Will to lay on the bed, kneeling above him as he slowly undid the buttons of Will's shirt in return.

Will's chest was rising and falling rapidly, his heartbeat so strong and fast Hannibal could see it pulsating in his chest, the fresh bruises on his ribs blooming brightly just below.

Hannibal extended a hand to Will, gently running his thumb along the curve of his jaw.

"I want to be mindful of the fact that this is your first time being with an alpha… I don't want you to be scared."

To his own surprise, Will found himself smiling, light-heartedly and honest.

"I'm not scared of you, Hannibal. Not of any part of you…"

Slowly Will propped himself up, enough for him to reach out to Hannibal, confirming his words with a gentle kiss to his lips.

"I told you, I trust you… You believe me, don't you?"

Hannibal looked at him for a long moment, taking in the bruised skin, the dried blood on Will's cheek where the skin had begun to heal underneath.

The remnants of the final price Will had paid to be with him.

"I do."

Will pulled him into another kiss, deeper, more longing this time as he peeled himself out of his shirt, mindlessly disregarding it as he set to opening Hannibal's pants, eager to finally rid them both of their clothes, to feel him, skin to skin.

Again, it was Hannibal who gently pulled back, pausing Will's motions, one final concern on his mind.

"You don't need to explain or elaborate, Will, but I need to know. Is there anything, anything at all, that you need me to be mindful of tonight?"

Will smiled faintly, moved that even now, in this situation of heightened instinctual attraction between them, Hannibal put his comfort above all else.

Gently Will ran his thumb over Hannibal's bottom lip, and a chill ran down his spine at the thought of the teeth beyond, sharp and powerful, how easily they would penetrate his skin.

"I want to see you…" Will replied softly, "I want to know where your hands are…"

He looked at Hannibal, his expression as demanding as it was loving.

“And I don’t want you to hold back… You know what we both need. So, please… take it…”

Will leaned in closer, hot breath against naked skin, and he could feel Hannibal’s breath hitch as his teeth firmly grazed a spot at his neck, leaving reddened skin behind.

A final look shared between them, and it was all Hannibal had needed to allow himself to let go. To allow himself to be swept along in the waves of heat Will offered and shared with him.

Will breathed a quiet sigh of relief as they had finally rid themselves of their clothes, nothing but skin between them now, the touch of their hands as gentle as they were longing, mindful of each other’s injuries.

He closed his eyes, savouring the way in which Hannibal’s hands slowly explored and worshipped his body, the way his lips pressed a firm, hot trail from his chest to his neck.

"Ah…!"

Will leaned his head back, moaning as Hannibal gently sucked at a spot high on his neck, so close to his scent glands it made Will's whole body shiver with arousal, fresh slick wetting the insides of his thighs as he squirmed beneath the alpha.

"Hannibal…!"

Will's hands aimlessly wandered over Hannibal’s back, pulling him closer, scratching over his skin, seeking an anchor to hold onto as he felt the fog in his mind grow thicker, masking any shame or insecurities he had, the pain he had endured that night.

When Hannibal met his gaze all Will could see was the pure, dark intensity of rut in his eyes, scent intensifying and welcoming, beckoning Will to lose himself in it, be consumed by it in any which way.

Hannibal kissed his parted lips, slowly, deeply, his voice low and rough in the space between them.

"You've thought about me like this before, haven't you? When you longed for my fingers inside of you…"

Will swallowed dryly, nodding, hips twitching involuntarily at the memory of how good Hannibal’s fingers had felt inside of him.

"Yes-..."

Will tried to hold onto Hannibal but merely caught his wrist, almost panicked at the way Hannibal brought distance between them, sitting back on his heels between Will's legs, pushing them further apart.

"Show me."

It was not an alpha command, Hannibal would not dare to use that kind of manipulation with Will, yet he didn't have to; not with how comfortably Will sank back into the sheets as he

watched Hannibal kiss the tip of his fingers, lips wrapping around them before he guided Will's uninjured hand between his legs.

Will rolled his hips slowly, never averting his gaze from Hannibal as he gave his own cock a few brief, firm strokes before reaching lower, fingers almost slipping with how incredibly wet he was.

He moaned softly, yet louder than he had allowed himself to be when hiding behind his fantasies, eager to make Hannibal see how much pleasure the mere thought of him had brought him.

There was no stretch, no resistance as Will pushed his first finger inside yet he still took his time, slowly moving his hand in tandem with his hips, the desire to be mated by the alpha in front of him as soon as possible quickly overshadowed by the sight of Hannibal watching him, eyes eagerly drinking in every detail of his body.

Slowly Will pulled his finger back out, just to give Hannibal the sight of burying two of them painfully slowly inside of himself as deeply as he could, moaning shamelessly.

"Feels so good…"

Hannibal met Will's eyes as he spoke, seeing a hint of mischief beyond the lust in his eyes.

"But not as good as yours…"

Hannibal smirked softly, shifting slightly as he used his knees to keep Will's thighs apart before reaching between his legs, pushing his index finger inside alongside Will's.

Will cursed under his breath, back arching slightly as he felt the comfortable, reassuring pressure, his anxious mind finally soothed at the intimate contact with the alpha.

"Hannibal-!"

A loud moan escaped Will's lips, feeling yet another finger inside of himself, moving and teasing, yet keeping from giving him any kind of proper satisfaction.

"Better?"

Will laughed breathlessly at the smooth, calm tone of Hannibal’s voice, the ridiculous contrast it set to the overflow of pheromones between them.

He needed a moment to centre himself, taking a deep breath so he would not react as carelessly as his instincts urged him to, screaming at him to present, to stop playing for time and finally give himself what he needed.

"Not quite…"

Hannibal’s eyes darkened as the smile on his lips grew wider, leaning over the other man to kiss him, deep and hungry, without ever losing his touch on him.

It was Will, however, who finally broke the glass wall between them, arching towards Hannibal as they kissed, just so he could reach between their legs, fingers grazing the growing knot at the root of Hannibal's cock.

Hannibal growled, quietly but still threatening, yet unsuccessful in deterring the omega.

Will took Hannibal's bottom lip between his teeth, biting at it so hard it dared to burst open again after barely having healed.

"Do it, Hannibal… Make me yours…"

Hannibal felt the hair at the back of his neck stand on end at Will's words, simple and softly spoken, yet so powerful he felt them burnt across the walls of his mind immediately.

As Will carefully pulled back his fingers Hannibal followed suit, using Will's slick and his own precum to lube himself up, paying attention especially to his knot as he did.

Hannibal laid down between Will's legs, kissing him slowly and deeply as he positioned himself.

"You can still say no, Will…"

Even through the heavy veil of pheromones of his heat he could see Will smile back at him in earnest, bold words masking the remnants of the forts he tore down to allow Hannibal to be so close to him.

"I'd hate to make you, Hannibal…"

Will pulled him into another kiss, softer than before, allowing Hannibal to drink the moans and whimpers from his lips as he finally pushed inside, the first breaching sensation of his swelling knot causing Will to dig his fingers into his back.

Small enough yet to pull back out, Hannibal altered between faster, harder thrusts, stopping just short of his knot, and slower, more careful thrusts, pushing his knot all the way inside.

Will wrapped his legs around Hannibal's hips, pulling him closer, taking him in as deeply as he possibly could, matching his rhythm as he found pleasure and comfort in the reassuring sensation of Hannibal's body on top of him, inside of him, his pheromones and warmth everywhere around him.

"No-...!" Will protested breathlessly, hips desperately chasing the sensation of the knot as Hannibal pulled back out, pulling at his hair with frustration.

Hannibal smiled through the discomfort, allowing Will to experience the intensity of all his feelings, gently licking into his mouth to distract him with another kiss.

It wouldn't take long before Hannibal moved his hips more quickly again, thrusting into Will harder, finding utmost pleasure in the wet heat of his body, muscles tensing around him more eagerly with every thrust.

Will slowly came apart beneath him, losing himself in the burning, all-consuming desire he experienced, moaning and panting as Hannibal drove him into the mattress with every thrust of their hips.

It was only when Hannibal's thrusts became slower, yet more intense that Will could tell he was getting close.

"Ahh-!!"

Will threw his head back with a breathless moan as he felt Hannibal finally push all the way inside, his knot swelling to its full potential inside of Will, stretching him and filling him up in ways his heat-ridden mind and body had only ever dared to dream of.

His whole body tensed, tears spilled from his tightly shut eyes as he dug his nails into Hannibal’s back, cumming with a silent scream between their bodies, his own orgasm only intensified by the way he felt Hannibal coming inside of him, deep and hot, filling him relentlessly with his own cum.

Will lay still in Hannibal’s arms, panting softly as his muscles clenched around Hannibal's knot, his omega instincts finally, briefly soothed by how hot and full he felt, reassured by how snug and firm the knot felt inside of him, making sure to keep all of Hannibal inside of Will.

Will turned his head ever so slightly, relaxed and compliant like a doll as Hannibal ran his hand through his hair, soothing him, lips pressing soft kisses along Will's neck before finally sinking his teeth into his flesh.

Will screamed, pain and pleasure ripping through him in the same instance as another orgasm did, every single nerve in his body receptive to Hannibal and Hannibal alone.

Feeling loved, fulfilled, understood, seen - everything Will had ever wanted, ever craved for in his life to the point of self-destruction, he had finally found it in the arms of Hannibal Lecter.

In the arms of his true mate.

"I love you..."

Gently, soothingly Hannibal ran his tongue over the mating bite mark, kissing and caressing it as he carefully rolled them over onto their sides, carefully avoiding putting pressure on Will's bruised ribs.

His hands ran over Will's back as he held him, giving them both an opportunity to rest comfortably until their bodies would allow them to part once more. To rest, until the next inevitable wave of heat would carry them both away.

"I love you, too, Will…"

Chapter 24

Hannibal was awoken by the sunshine of the early morning hours and warm, soft lips pressed against his own.

Slowly he opened his eyes as a smile formed on his lips, hands reaching out, slowly running over Will's back.

"Good morning, Will…"

"Mornin'..." Will replied quietly, voice hoarse with lust as he leaned in for another kiss, glad to find Hannibal respond just as enthusiastically and longingly now, his fingers slowly tangling in Will's dark curls.

Will leaned in closer from his position above Hannibal, slowly grinding their hips together as they kissed, losing himself in the sensation of finally sensing a deeper, more intimate relationship with Hannibal, with no more doubts or shame to hold them back.

"You should eat… At least get something to drink…"

"Later," Will brushed off easily between kisses, body and mind solely focused on Hannibal and the gratifying heat he wanted to share with him.

Hannibal moaned deeply, hands coming to rest firmly on Will's butt cheeks as he felt the omega's hips grinding against him harder, coating his cock with his slick with every move.

"You're not seriously thinking about breakfast now, are you…?"

Will's voice oozed with confidence and teasing, teeth gently tugging at Hannibal’s lip, nibbling at his jaw and neck, followed by wet, hot kisses.

"No," Hannibal smiled calmly, "Only you… Tasting you…"

Will smiled breathlessly, delighted to find his mate receptive to his touch. He licked his lips, brushing his unruly hair out of his face as he sat up, straddling Hannibal’s hips, giving him an exquisite view of his naked body in the glorious morning light.

Hannibal took in every detail, every birthmark, every scar on his skin, every curve and line of his body. Took in the way Will's thigh muscles tensed as he supported himself, the way he closed his eyes, red, wet lips parted with a deep moan as he laid his head back, the fresh, red bite mark on his neck on full display as he slowly sank down on Hannibal’s cock.

Hannibal drew in a sharp breath, hands now taking hold of Will's hips as he moved on top of him, savouring the sensation of feeling his entire length inside without the knot present yet.

"Hannibal…"

Will leaned back slightly, supporting himself on the bed next to Hannibal's thighs, slowly picking up the pace, riding him harder, muscles clenching tightly around the base of his cock with every thrust as he eventually felt the knot growing inside of him.

Hannibal ran his hands over Will's thighs, growling softly as he grabbed his hips and pulled him down harder onto himself, watching the girth of his increasing knot split Will open with every thrust. He grabbed Will's hips harder, slightly changing the angle of his thrusts, instincts of possessiveness over his omegan mate too powerful to resist at the sight of the faint bulge in his abdomen, just below the scars Hannibal's claws had left on him.

"Will…"

Hannibal took one of Will's hands, placing it just above the spot, letting him feel what he saw.

"Fuck-...!"

Will gasped, tensing around Hannibal even more, the reality of how deeply Hannibal had penetrated him inside and out nearly too overwhelming to grasp.

Will drove his hips down harder, forcing himself to relentlessly take in and release the nearly fully-grown knot until he physically couldn't anymore, knot firmly locking in place, his muscles tensing and trembling with the intensity of Will's arousal as he came, spilling himself all over his chest and Hannibal's stomach.

Finally, Will leaned forward a bit more, trying to catch his breath, the echo of his orgasm still pulsating in his body as he felt Hannibal come inside him only a moment later.

Slowly, careful not to disrupt Will's comfort in his lap, Hannibal sat up, wrapping his arms around him, their lips touching in breathless, hungry kisses.

Will pulled back only slowly, hesitant to let any space come between them.

He looked at Hannibal for a long, silent moment, thumb gently grazing his lips, his jawline, before he rested his hand at the back of Hannibal's head, fingers tangling in his hair.

It was a soft, gentle tug, almost hesitant in seeking permission, yet Hannibal obediently tilted his head, giving Will access to his bare neck.

Will leaned in closer, placing soft, firm kisses against the hot skin, feeling Hannibal's pulse, taking in the intense notes of his scent.

Then, finally, he sunk his teeth into him, holding onto Hannibal tighter.

Sealing their bond.

Truly accepting him as his mate.

Hannibal stayed perfectly composed, hands slowly and lightly traveling over Will's back, safe for the way Will could feel his hips twitch, knot pulsating inside of him as he filled him yet

again.

Will placed a firm kiss onto the fresh bitemark before Hannibal pulled him into a kiss, tasting his own blood on Will's tongue, savouring the moment of ancient union between them.

It was then that Will finally broke through the barriers of Hannibal’s composure, his claws digging into the right side of his chest, ripping apart the stitches, tearing open the cut Jack had left on Hannibal, making it his own.

A shiver ran down Will’s spine at the sensation of Hannibal’s blood on his skin, permeating the air between them, mingling with their scents of heat and rut.

Hannibal held onto Will tighter, his blood mixing with the sweat and pheromones on their skin as he kissed him, hard and breathless, succumbing to the intensity of the knowledge that finally, Will had left his mark on Hannibal, just like he had always craved in his deepest, darkest thoughts.

They stayed like this for what felt like an eternity, holding each other, kissing and caressing, hungry and gentle, time slowing down just for them, gone and forgotten the rest of the world beyond their embrace of the bond they shared.

It was Will who eventually broke the silence between them, words softly spoken into the air of raw violence and lust, possessiveness and fragility between touches of their lips.

"I love you…"

Hannibal smiled at him, gently brushing an unruly curl out of his face, delighting in the deeply affectionate and satiated expression in his eyes.

"And I love you, Will…"

Hannibal silently regarded him for a moment, drinking in the scent of Will's pheromones blending with his own, the deep, calming sense of belonging he felt through the newest layer of their connection.

Then his smile grew a little wider, turning them around, gently forcing Will to rest in the sheets beneath, marveling at the sight of the marks he had left on Will in blood and touch.

"Which is exactly why I will feed you now. You need to take care of your body, especially during your heat. And that is final."

With a soft kiss to Will's lips he carefully pulled back, both from his body and his embrace, and left the bed to allow Will to rest and nest as he pleased while he took care of breakfast, only returning to gently clean Will of the mess they had made, before he tended to his own wounds.

Will frowned, yet got himself comfortable in the sheets and pillows all the same as Hannibal took care of him, soothed by the way Hannibal’s scent still surrounded him, lingering in the fabric of the sheets.

Will had spent most of the day in bed, nesting, eating, drinking, and staying as close to Hannibal as possible before he had eventually dared to trust his legs again enough to walk, desperately in need of a proper shower.

Freshly washed up and naked he stood by the window, watching the sun set in the distance, bright, bold colours illuminating the sky, along with the hills and the remains of the Castello di Castiglione del Terziere in the distance.

As the daylight faded so did Will's feelings of being entirely disconnected from the rest of the world.

God, what was he thinking?

Only two hours outside of Florence after committing several homicides, high-profile ones at that, and with at least Hannibal's face among the FBI's most wanted… they were too close, *way* too close.

"We need to leave," Will uttered quietly, anxiety tinging the clear notes of his vibrant heat scent.

"We will," Hannibal agreed calmly, wrapping his arms around him from behind, kissing his shoulder, "If you are feeling better by then, we can leave tomorrow."

Gently he turned Will to face him, easing his worries with a slow, deep kiss.

"I told you, my love, we shall not live in fear… There is still ample time for us to move. I would not have allowed for us to linger here if it compromised your safety…"

Will exhaled deeply, nodding quietly.

No matter what would happen, he would trust Hannibal as Hannibal trusted him.

"Thank you… for this… For giving me time to enjoy my heat with you now, rather than forcing myself through it hurting and feeling sick…"

"We will do so for every heat of yours," Hannibal replied calmly, "Because now, we can spend them together, cherishing every moment of it…"

Will nodded softly, yet his face scrunched slightly with discomfort as he felt cum and slick trickle down his thigh.

"I hope I'll get better at figuring out how to clean up our messes until then…"

Hannibal smirked softly, a finger gently wiping away the droplet on Will's thigh, licking it off his skin.

"And what if you didn't? I would quite enjoy the thought of you, carrying my seed inside of you. Letting me claim you, even if I cannot be present at every moment…"

Will felt a shiver run down his spine, the thought too enticing to entirely discard.

Hannibal’s lips gently hovered above his, teasing him as his long, warm fingers reached between his thighs, slowly slipping inside the wet heat of his body.

"Oh, fuck-..."

Will held onto Hannibal’s shoulders, slightly rising to the tip of his toes as his hips moved towards the touch of Hannibal’s hand.

Will closed his eyes, burying his face at the uninjured side of Hannibal’s chest as he slowly worked his fingers inside one by one, teasing Will as much as he was stimulating him.

Will held onto him tighter, heat flaring up inside of him once more, easily summoned by the touch of his mate.

"Hannibal…"

Hannibal felt a gentle chill of arousal and anticipation run along his skin at the sound of Will's voice, his hot breath against his bare chest.

Hannibal leaned in closer, kissing Will's neck, worshipping the mark on his skin as Will leaned his head back obediently, allowing for Hannibal to touch him more, please him more as the pace of his hand picked up, long, strong fingers inside of him stretching him comfortably.

Will's breath hitched in his throat as he came, nails digging into Hannibal’s skin, muscles tensing around his fingers inside of him, coating them with even more slick.

Will blinked slowly, trying to gather his wits about himself again as Hannibal gently pulled him into another kiss, a small sound of displeasure leaving his lips as he felt Hannibal’s fingers pull back.

Will watched as Hannibal licked at his fingertips, tasting Will on his own skin, arousal and painful impatience slowly building up inside him.

"Think we have some more time to get back to bed…?"

Hannibal smiled, one of his arms reaching around Will's waist.

"Most definitely…"

Will let out a deep, satisfied sigh as he got comfortable in the sheets and pillows, his body feeling heavy and warm with the comforting, reassuring satisfaction of both breeding and nesting all night, staying close to Hannibal during the entire time.

He slowly rolled over onto his side, reaching out to put an arm around Hannibal's chest, his fingers lightly grazing the spots on the large bandage where Hannibal had sewn up Will's

claw marks beneath.

Before he could think better of it, the words had already left Will’s lips, materialising his deepest, most possessive urges in the space between them.

"I don't want them to heal… I want them to scar…"

Hannibal smiled calmly, placing his hand on Will’s.

"I assure you, they will. Just like the marks I have left on you."

Will smiled faintly, holding onto Hannibal's hand.

He sat up slightly, leaning over him to kiss him, gently and tenderly, opposing the potential of his own violence, carved into Hannibal’s skin.

With clarity returning to his mind in between the heavy fog of heat they had navigated together, Will's mind once again began to wander, reflecting both on their past, as well as the future, the countless nights of affection and brutality that still lay ahead of them.

Will stayed quiet for a long time, his head gently resting on Hannibal's chest, unsure of whether to broach the topic or leave the world outside for as long as possible.

"Will? What are you thinking about?"

Will closed his eyes as he felt Hannibal’s fingers gently run through his hair, bestowing him with all the comfort and affection from him he had so desperately ached for for years.

"I was thinking… that I might know where I want us to go next…"

Will raised his head, looking up at Hannibal.

"But only if it suits you, of course…"

Hannibal smiled, his thumb caressing the abrasions high on Will's cheek. He couldn’t wait for the skin to recover, leaving nothing behind of Jack Crawford and their old lives but distant memories, locked away safely in their minds.

"We have all the world for us to explore, my love. I will gladly follow your curiosity wherever it may lead us…"

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Slowly Will rolled over onto his side, greeted by the breathtaking, unobstructed view of the trees and mountains, the sight of Mount Fuji in the distance as he woke up from his nap.

“Hm…”

He stretched comfortably, still feeling warm and well rested from the onsen bath he had taken earlier, now deeply relaxed after the long, exhausting nights of dismembering their victims they had had before coming here, to Hakone in the Kanagawa Prefecture, to unwind for a couple of days. Soon, they would be on the move again, never lingering in one place for too long as they had back in Italy, exploring the country just as much as their urges.

As much as Hannibal’s past.

Will took a deep breath, looking up at the ceiling above, resting comfortably on their futon beds on the traditional tatami floor of the hotel they were staying at.

Initially, having already trespassed on the grounds of Hannibal’s childhood home in Lithuania, Will had been hesitant to approach the heritage of Hannibal’s aunt Murasaki; the woman who had raised him in his mother’s stead, alongside his uncle Robertus.

Even now Will remembered the heirlooms of Japanese descent that had once adorned Hannibal’s home back in Baltimore, seamlessly fitting in among his extravagant and elegant taste for decor.

Being here now, it seemed Hannibal finally felt comfortable connecting to memories of his aunt and uncle again, relishing in visiting the places of their stories he had only ever visited in his memory palace before.

Some days, Will felt like he could see a glimpse of the deeply wounded child that still resided within Hannibal, slowly and ever so slightly healing again under the watchful, protective approach to the surroundings and experiences of the now adult man.

And Will was both honoured and grateful to be a part of those moments, sharing them with his mate.

Will smiled as he heard Hannibal return, even more so as he saw the slight flush on his cheeks.

“Did you enjoy your bath, darling?”

Hannibal chuckled softly, never quite sure if Will used pet names for him in jest or in earnest.

“I did, thank you…”

Hannibal smiled, taking a deep, satisfied breath as he looked outside, enjoying how visible the famous landmark was on that particular day.

Will stood up and approached Hannibal, enjoying the view right in front of him instead. He had come to greatly appreciate how handsome Hannibal looked outside of his usual suit attire, and the traditional, charcoal grey yukata he wore now made no exception to that, paired with his half-wet, slicked back hair.

Gently Will reached for the fabric of the light robe, enjoying the sensation of it between his fingers.

Hannibal smiled, watching the absent expression on Will's face.

"What are you thinking about, my love?"

Will laughed softly, shaking his head as he leaned in closer to kiss him.

"How handsome you are… And how much I love this look on you…"

Hannibal smiled against his lips, his hands coming to rest on Will's hips, holding him close.

Ever since their time in Italy, not a day went by that Hannibal did not appreciate the man and mate by his side, the way they day by day grew more into sharing their personal spaces, adapting to each other.

Never would they have believed that intimacy would feel so unburdened, coming so easily to them after years of struggling with the mere concept, always unsure where love ended and danger began.

Now, at last, they were becoming one, and becoming one another.

"And what are you thinking about…?"

Will smiled softly, his hand lingering on Hannibal's chest just above his scars.

Hannibal slowly looked him up and down, taking in his dark, messy curls, beautiful, wild blue eyes, the way Will's own yukata had become slightly undone in his sleep, the looser fit on him now lasciviously revealing the mating bite mark on his neck.

A playful grin tugged at the corners of Will's mouth as he leaned in for another kiss, hands slowly wandering over Hannibal's body, sensing the increasing arousal in Hannibal's scent.

Hannibal's hand came to rest on Will's cheek, caressing him gently as he looked into his eyes.

"I once told you I would be honest with you about my needs. My fantasies. I told you, I would speak to you about them freely and honestly…"

Will's lips gently hovered over Hannibal's for a long moment, teasing, alluding, before finally stealing another kiss from him.

"So tell me about them now…" Will whispered, heart thumping with anticipation and excitement.

"Do you remember what you said that night? When we had dinner with Antony Dimmond?"

Will chuckled softly, lowering his gaze.

"You know I just said all kinds of things that night to wind up Dimmond…"

"The words we speak in jest, my love…"

When Will met Hannibal's eyes again, there was a deep, dark desire burning in his amber eyes, gone the excuses of their past to hide behind.

Will inhaled deeply, licking his lips, fingers slowly running along Hannibal's jaw as he took in the increasingly sharpening notes of his scents, blooming with lust on his warm, clean skin.

"Is that what you want…?" Will whispered against his lips, voice trembling ever so slightly with desire, "Me, tasting you…?"

Hannibal's gaze remained calm and focused, voice gentle and unwavering despite the enticing images his own mind constructed at the very idea.

"Yes…"

Will nodded softly, reuniting their lips in a long, slow kiss, contrasting his own rapid heartbeat.

Hannibal knew Will had rarely been with any alpha other than himself in the past, knew of the boundaries and insecurities that still clung to him, impacting his level of comfort with certain aspects of intimacy between them.

It was Hannibal, however, who lent a voice to those concerns.

"Just because it is a thought, does not mean it has to materialise in reality, Will. I will not propose anything that causes you discomfort."

Will sighed softly with relief, glad that he still found Hannibal to be understanding after all the shared work they had done, and he nodded gently, more to himself than to Hannibal.

"I want to…" Will ran his hands over Hannibal's chest, feeling his heartbeat, "I do…"

He placed a last, parting kiss to Hannibal's lips before he carefully sank to his knees in front of him, hands gently traversing along his hips and thighs, feeling his firm muscles beneath the thin, grey layers of fabric.

Will ignored the pounding, aching anxieties that tugged at him, making himself so submissive and vulnerable in front of an alpha, yet it was his instincts that soothed him all the same, glad to finally be closer to the man he had chosen to be his mate.

Slowly and smoothly Will loosened the knot of Hannibal's obi, eliciting a quiet but deep, guttural growl from him as he gently pushed aside the layers of fabric, placing a gentle kiss to Hannibal's lower abdomen as his hands ran along his hips, freeing his hardening cock from the confinement of his underwear.

Will wrapped one of his hands around his shaft, and he could already feel the base of Hannibal’s cock slowly starting to swell, silently wondering how many times Hannibal had already gone through this scenario in his head, being so receptive to his touch.

He leaned in closer, placing a firm, wet kiss to the spot he knew would soon become a knot, and felt Hannibal’s fingers burying in his hair in return.

Slowly, almost carefully Will kissed a trail along his shaft, all the way to his tip, meeting Hannibal's eyes as he opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue, flattening it against him as he licked over his tip slowly and firmly.

"Will-..."

Hannibal's moan was low and deep, causing the hair at the back of Will's neck to stand on end and slick to spill between his thighs, wetting his underwear.

Will opened his mouth a little wider, wrapping his lips around Hannibal's tip, slowly and carefully sucking at him, before hesitantly taking him deeper into his mouth, not used to the sensation, the girth, taste and smell that made him want to melt, to lose himself in his deepest, most submissive instincts.

Slowly Will worked Hannibal into his mouth, hollowing his cheeks around him, stroking the parts of him he could not fit into his mouth with his hands.

Soon he felt Hannibal’s knot swell to completion, his cock twitching slightly on his tongue, eager to surrender to Will’s mouth.

The tug of Hannibal’s hand in Will's hair was surprisingly gentle, given the dark, deeply aroused notes of his scents, yet it was enough to send shivers down Will's spine.

"I'm close…"

Instead of heeding his warning and pulling away, Will slowly looked up at Hannibal through his lashes, keeping his eyes on him even as he felt him come in his mouth, down his throat, drowning him in unfamiliar sensations and the urge to rut against his leg, shivering with arousal at the pure taste of alpha pheromones on his tongue.

Will gathered every bit of concentration to keep calm, to not pull away, to not submit to his instincts to present quite yet, to fulfil Hannibal's fantasy to the best of his abilities.

Only when Will felt like he could no longer contain the relentless stream of cum in his mouth without choking on it he slowly pulled back, still stroking Hannibal with his hands, letting him spill himself all over Will's neck and chest.

"Will-..."

Hannibal restrained himself just as desperately, gently letting his hand wander down to Will's face, caressing him there.

It was only when Hannibal's thumb slowly ran over Will's wet, red bottom lip that Will tilted his head back, slowly and skillfully like he had when eating the oysters that night in Florence, his Adam's apple bobbing softly as he finally swallowed Hannibal's cum.

A heartbeat passed between them, suspended in the air, and Will felt chills run down his spine at the tension growing rapidly.

Then, it snapped.

Will gasped as he suddenly found himself flat on his back with Hannibal above him, kissing and biting at his neck, lips and tongue savouring the sensation of the scar of the mating bite as he impatiently tore off Will's yukata and underwear, spreading his thighs as he laid down between them.

"Hannibal-...!"

Will moaned hoarsely, unable to keep his voice down, hands trembling slightly in Hannibal’s hair as he now felt his lips hot on his hips, kissing a trail lower between his legs.

Will couldn’t help but scream as he felt Hannibal’s tongue spread him wide open, licking up the slick that relentlessly spilled over his soft skin, hands firmly keeping Will's thighs apart as he attempted to move away from his mouth.

"W-What-..." Will stuttered quietly, fingers pulling at Hannibal’s hair, harsher than he had intended as he felt their shared pheromones in the air between them cloud his mind, skin burning and body aching with the unmistakable sensation of heat. "Hannibal, you can't-"

Will interrupted himself with a breathless moan, hips bucking towards Hannibal as he felt his tongue slowly push inside, accompanied by one of his hands firmly wrapping around his leaking cock.

In any clearer state of mind Will might have felt ashamed for the noises that left his mouth, moans and whimpers, breathless pleas as he felt Hannibal drive him right to the edge, tongue and lips and hands on him too hot, too much, too arousing to resist, soon pushing him over in one of the most gratifying orgasms Will had ever experienced in his entire life.

Panting softly, trying to suck air into his hot, aching body, Will felt Hannibal's reassuring weight on top of him, and he could taste himself on his lips as they kissed.

When Will opened his eyes again, all he could see, all he could focus on was Hannibal, his scent and pheromones making him the clearest, most vibrant being he had ever perceived.

"I love you…" Will hummed, then protested softly, "I wanted this to be about you…"

Hannibal smiled.

"Trust me, my love, this is *entirely* about me."

He leaned down, stealing another soft, loving kiss from Will's lips.

"I love you, too… All of you…"

Looking at Will, Hannibal saw multitudes; he saw the gentleness in his touch when he comforted, and the determination in his motions when he killed. He saw the best and worst of Will's empathy, love and cruelty sharing the same mind and body. He saw the perfectly unpredictable mirror image of his own thoughts and experiences, finding a comfortable home in the existence of Will Graham, only heightened by the sense of belonging and trust through their mating bond.

Hannibal smiled down at him, then slowly turned them around, allowing for Will to stay in Hannibal's embrace as they comfortably rested beside each other.

For a while there was nothing but the sounds of nature and subtle noises of the hotel around them filling their space, fresh air from outside mingling with the heavy scents of warm skin and sex in their room.

It didn't take long, however, for Will's mind to begin to wander again, enveloping him in a heavy, burdensome silence, rather than a comforting one.

Hannibal gently pulled him closer, worried he might still come to regret the previous intimate encounter between them.

"Something is troubling you."

Will smiled slightly, subtly shaking his head.

"It's nothing…"

"Will…"

No more secrets.

No more carrying your burden alone.

Will took a moment to take a hold of the words in his mind, grasping at the conflicting emotions he felt.

"I'm okay. I just… I don't really miss anyone, or anything… my dogs, on the other hand…"

Will chuckled softly, trying not to linger on the sadness that came along with being sentimental.

Hannibal gently ran his fingers through Will's curls, allowing him space for the feelings of empathy he could not relate to. Even if he could not share in the burden of Will's memories and feelings, he would still acknowledge them all the same.

"I made arrangements, back then… when I was released from the hospital…" Will began quietly, feeling the urge to share rising up his throat, loosening his lips, "I knew Alana would

never be a permanent solution… I didn't want her to have to think about the lost potential for goodness she had seen in me everytime she looked at those dogs… wondering if she could have changed me…"

"And I didn't want them to be rehomed separately, so… I found a woman who owns a farm. Close enough so it would be a daytrip at most, far enough so the dogs wouldn't return home to my property… seeking and awaiting me in places I'd never return to…"

"She had taken over her uncle's farm. He had a few horses, but mostly cattle and sheep, selling the meat for profit. When we talked, she explained how those screams of the lambs, searching for their mothers, frightened just before slaughter, had never left her since she was a little girl… So, when she inherited the farm, she decided to change things. Made it into an animal sanctuary, where animals with no homes or dreadful futures could come, and live in peace until the end of their natural lives…"

Will chuckled at the thought of Buster's short, chubby frame cuddled up deeply into the thick wool of a large sheep.

"I know Clarice will care for them well. I know they will have a good life there…"

"And so will you," Hannibal added with a gentle smile, brushing through Will's curls. "You are free, Will. We can do however we please, go wherever might suit us… You just have to say the word…"

"It will be nice to watch the snow fall," Will mused quietly, the sight of the woods and mountains right outside their room returning a sense of peace and familiarity to him, "I'd like to experience winter here. Maybe even watch the cherry blossoms in the spring… and once we get tired of the cold, we could go somewhere south…"

"We could also go to France… You could show me where you grew up…" Will smiled gently, then chuckled, trying to lighten the mood as he gently ran his hands over Hannibal's arms, "Or we could escape somewhere warm, like migrating birds…"

"And where would you have us go?" Hannibal returned with an amused smile, enjoying Will's enthusiasm for their life on the run.

Their life of exploring the world together, mending each other while leaving destruction in their wake.

"I thought you'd never ask…" Will grinned, unwinding from Hannibal's embrace just enough to reach for the small tablet they shared, unlocking the screen to present to Hannibal what he had been looking at before falling asleep.

When he gently pushed the small tablet into Hannibal's view, the encrypted internet connection allowed them access to the newest *TattleCrime* online article, which was accompanied by a big photo of a retiring Frederick Chilton, and his plans to settle on the warm island country just south of Florida.

"Cuba…"

When Hannibal met Will’s gaze, the expression in his eyes was dark and hungry, thrilled at having found a target for their shared violence quite so dangerously close to home.

And if Will would not allow for them to travel to Louisiana yet, giving Hannibal an opportunity to bring vengeance upon those that had hurt Will in the past, this would suffice for now.

Hannibal put the tablet aside, his expression calm and focused.

“I will agree to your proposition. On one condition.”

Will felt his heart sink at the serious tone in Hannibal’s voice, repositioning himself so he could look at him.

“Of course… What is it?”

Hannibal looked at him for a long moment, his hand laid upon his face, gently caressing the curve of Will’s cheek bone, absorbed in his own thoughts.

"I wish for the rings we carry with us to no longer solely serve as temporary mismatched decoy and deception. I would like to replace them with a more honest intention, and greater purpose."

Finally, his eyes met Will’s again, his gaze on him softer than before.

“I want you to marry me, Will.”

Hannibal felt the heat rise to Will’s cheeks as his touch on him lingered, felt the way his heart began to race in his chest as he still laid half on top of him.

“Hannibal…”

Will leaned in closer, his fingers running through the other man’s hair, holding onto him as he bowed his head, pressing a firm, yet loving kiss to the bite mark at Hannibal’s neck.

“Of course… Of course I will marry you…”

Will's voice was quiet and gentle, yet the weight of his words lay heavy in the space between them, soothing the parts of Hannibal that still dreaded the violent mistakes of their past.

"You have changed my life in every way, and made me feel complete and loved where I felt broken and lacking… Whether it be mating, marriage, touch, words… I want nothing more than to show you how much I love you for it in every way I can in return…"

Hannibal smiled as he felt Will's words to be accompanied by the tips of his fingers gently grazing the scars he had left on Hannibal’s chest, and how natural it came to him to protectively place his hand to the scars on Will's abdomen in return.

Both of them broken and mended, dead and reborn at the touch of one another, growing stronger in the bond they shared.

Just like the dark, blue and grey colours of the heavy winds that had carried the destruction of Zephyrus with it, like Chloris born anew in Flora, adorned with brightness and light, so would they, too, leave behind the dreadful winters of their lives and embrace each other in the new shared warmth and beauty of their very own spring.

Chapter End Notes

I cannot believe this story has come to an end. Thank you to all of you who have read this far and shown your support in any which way, or may still do.
I appreciate it so much more than I can ever hope to make you understand.

Much love, and until we meet again,

ira x

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